

TOUCHING THE UNTOUCHABLE: THE  
LANGUAGE OF TOUCH IN THE POETRY OF  
MICHAEL SYMMONS ROBERTS

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis analyses the language of touch in the poetry of Michael Symmons Roberts. A single-author study, it uses key tropes in Roberts's poetry (shell/spark, ghost/machine, body/soul) as points of engagement with the wider concerns of contemporary poetry discourse. The mechanics of contact are explored through the investigation of the limit of the conceit and the trope of the 'edgelands'. The thesis concludes with four case studies in which touchable touches on untouchable in Roberts's work ('voice-print', care, contamination, 'metaxu'). The tactile textual analysis of Roberts's poetry is read in relation to the writings on touch of Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Derrida in order to explore the various aspects in which touch is meaningful as a critical and poetical concept. Specifically, this thesis draws on their writings to demonstrate the insistence on separation as a condition of contact in Roberts's poetry, an emphasis which allows Roberts to create alternatives to traditional, Cartesian binaries of the touchable and untouchable. Furthermore, the language of touch draws attention to the shared concerns in Roberts's poetry and different poetic traditions, in particular Metaphysical poetry and Modernism. A central concern of this thesis is the extent to which Roberts's poetry represents a metaphysical poetry of the twenty-first century. This thesis contributes to the existing discourse on Roberts's writing, by extending and critiquing the engagement with his work to date. This thesis ultimately suggests that Roberts is a model poet of the contemporary period for the way his poetry negotiates contemporary events and social developments, and for the way his underlying poetics resonate with contemporary thinking in other disciplines such as theology and philosophy.

## NOTES AND ABBREVIATIONS

Roberts's poetry is noteworthy for what I have called homonymic titling, that is the use of identical titles for different poems. For the sake of clarity, I have followed the example of *PN Review* 199, in which homonymically titled poems from the collection *Drysalter* have been numbered.<sup>1</sup> As a consequence, homonymically titled poems, which are not numbered in the collections they are published in, are differentiated by roman numerals in brackets in this thesis, e.g. 'Mapping the Genome (I)', 'Mapping the Genome (II)'. Poem titles which appear as part of a numbered sequence in their collections, also have roman numerals, but without brackets, e.g. 'Last Words – I', 'Last Words – II'.

Throughout this thesis, I will differentiate between the words Metaphysical and metaphysical, a rule taken from David Reid who capitalizes Metaphysical to refer to the movement of poetry in the seventeenth century, and the lower case when using it in any other sense, such as with regard to metaphysical philosophy.<sup>2</sup>

References to the *Oxford English Dictionary* will appear as the abbreviation *OED*.

The online version of the *OED* was used for this thesis <http://www.oed.com/>. All entries were verified and accessed on the 2 September 2015.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Symmons Roberts, 'Eight Poems', *PN Review*, 199 (2011), pp. 50-51.

<sup>2</sup> David Reid, *The Metaphysical Poets* (UK: Longman, 2000), p. 11.

Further abbreviations for key texts used in this thesis are:

<i>JD</i>	John Donne, <i>Complete English Poems</i>
<i>E</i>	Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts, <i>Edgelands</i>
<i>SK</i>	Michael Symmons Roberts, <i>Soft Keys</i>
<i>RS</i>	Michael Symmons Roberts, <i>Raising Sparks</i>
<i>BB</i>	Michael Symmons Roberts, <i>Burning Babylon</i>
<i>C</i>	Michael Symmons Roberts, <i>Corpus</i>
<i>HH</i>	Michael Symmons Roberts, <i>The Half Healed</i>
<i>DS</i>	Michael Symmons Roberts, <i>Drysalter</i>
<i>PEPP</i>	<i>The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics</i>



## INTRODUCTION

The central research question of this thesis asks what is at stake in the use of the language of touch in the poetry of Michael Symmons Roberts. Through an extensive textual analysis, it seeks to understand how far Roberts's poetry, informed by his tactile poetics, represents, thematically and stylistically, a metaphysical poetry of the twenty-first century. To answer this question, particular attention will be paid to the way in which Roberts's poetry repeatedly stages a touching of the untouchable. This thesis also establishes to what extent the language of touch offers the possibility of creating a point of mutual understanding between diverse religious and secular readerships in light of the poet's own question, how can contemporary poets 'explore religious faith and experience in a secularised language and culture'.<sup>3</sup> As well as contributing to existing scholarship on Roberts's poetry, this thesis contributes to the wider discourse on touch and literature. Specifically, it identifies the resurgent academic interest in the two apparently unconnected scholarly fields of *haptics* on the one hand and contemporary poetry on the other hand as evidence of concerns arising from a shared contemporary milieu.

Roberts has published six major poetry collections to date, has been shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize three times, and has won both the Forward Prize for Best Collection and the Whitbread Poetry Award, among many others. However, as

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Symmons Roberts, 'Poetry in a Post-Secular Age', *Poetry Review*, 98 (2008), 69-75 (p.69).

David Wheatley writes, 'the critical attention received by contemporary poets is often of an ephemeral kind, with even prize-winning status conferring no guarantee of a reputation's survival'.<sup>4</sup> Despite his acclaim, there has been no significant critical study made of Roberts's poetry, a striking omission when set against the background of the burgeoning field of contemporary poetry criticism that has seen a range of critical studies made of a number of Roberts's contemporaries, including Kathleen Jamie, Carol Ann Duffy, and Don Paterson.<sup>5</sup> It is this omission which prompts the demand for and extensive textual analysis of his work, and 'the pace of engagement with language, the care and the speculation, the imaginative work, and the historical questions which close reading involves'.<sup>6</sup>

This thesis identifies above all that what comes to stand out in the close reading of Roberts's poetry is the high level of attention to the tactile register that occurs in his writing. This includes instances of physical contact between people and objects, as well as the notion of touch in its broadest sense, such as when one says, 'this poem touched me'. His poetry also involves the use of a broad palette of tactile language applied to both secular and spiritual concerns. This attention to the language of touch in turn coincides with a resurgence in the field of what might be broadly speaking called *haptics* (the study of the sense of touch) across a broad

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<sup>4</sup> David Wheatley, *Contemporary British Poetry* (London: Palgrave, 2015), p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Kathleen Jamie: *Essays and Poems on Her Work*, ed. Rachel Falconer (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014); Angelica Michelis and Antony Rowland, *The Poetry of Carol Ann Duffy: Choosing Tough Words* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); Don Paterson: *Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. by Natalie Pollard (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Adam Piette, 'Contemporary Poetry and Close Reading', in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Poetry*, ed. by Peter Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 230-245 (p. 237).

range of academic disciplines.<sup>7</sup> The proliferation of recent publications concerned with the question of touch in literary criticism also echoes the growing academic interest in contemporary poetry as a subject, to the extent that the critical interest in touch has become itself a signature feature of contemporary thought.<sup>8</sup>

It is no coincidence that the interest in touch coincides with a corresponding interest in contemporary poetry. Wheatley's *Contemporary British Poetry* (2015), as well as two other recent books — Nerys Williams's *Contemporary Poetry* (2011) and *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Poetry* edited by Peter Robinson (2013) — all draw attention to the particularly slippery nature of the label. This quality is generated principally by the word *contemporary* itself ('belonging to the same time, age, or period; living, existing, or occurring together in time', *OED*). As the contemporary is constantly in occurrence and re-establishes itself with every

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<sup>7</sup> *The Book of Touch*, ed. by Constance Classen (New York: Berg, 2005); Constance Classen, *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch* (University of Illinois Press, 2012); Tiffany Field, *Touch* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001); Elizabeth D. Harvey, *Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); David Howes, *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Cultural Reader* (Oxford & New York: Berg, 2005); Gabriel Josipovici, *Touch* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); Erin Manning, *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty* (London and Mineapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Mark Paterson, *The Senses of Touch: Haptics, Affects and Technologies* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2007); Christopher Perricone, 'The Aspiration to the Condition of Touch', *Philosophy and Literature*, 30, (2006), 229-237; Christopher Perricone, 'The Place of Touch in the Arts', *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 41 (2007), 90-104; Naomi Segal, *Consensuality: Didier Anzieu, Gender and the Sense of Touch* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2009); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect. Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Maureen Curtin, *Out of touch: Skin tropes and Identities in Woolf, Ellison, Pynchon, and Acker* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003); Santanu Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); David Fredrick, 'Haptic Poetics', *Arethusa*, 32 (1999), 49-83; Abbie Garrington, *Haptic Modernism: Touch and the Tactile in Modernist Writing* (Edinburgh/New York: Edinburgh University Press/ Columbia University Press, 2012); Sander L. Gilman, 'Goethe's Touch: Touching, Seeing and Sexuality', in *Inscribing the Other* (Lincoln NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1991); R. Mondiano, 'Coleridge's Views on Touch and Other Senses', *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities*, 81 (1982), 28-41; Marion Thain, 'Thomas Hardy's Poetics of Touch', *Victorian Poetry*, 51 (2013), 129-145.

passing moment, the contemporary period cannot have clearly definable limits.

Wheatley claims that 'the "contemporary" is an often elusive commodity'.<sup>9</sup>

Robinson similarly writes of 'the fugitive nature of the present moment', which means that 'the contemporary and its notional parentheses are in perpetual forward movement'.<sup>10</sup> The high degree of intangibility inherent in the notion of the contemporary is one way to explain the corollary interest that occurs in the sense of touch and the desire for the sense of tangible certainty it appears to offer as a counterweight to contemporary uncertainty. However, recent writings on the haptic ultimately demonstrate that the sense of touch rarely delivers the sense of concreteness it is thought to offer. As will be demonstrated, touch is in many ways troubled by the same questions around the unreliability of limits and borders as the contemporary is.

Since the closing date of the contemporary period cannot be fixed, because the contemporary is in 'perpetual forward movement', critical attention turns to the start date instead. However, this proves to be almost as elusive as notions of the present, and significantly varied starting points are tendered. Robinson looks at the contemporary as encompassing the last sixty years,<sup>11</sup> while Williams suggests the past forty.<sup>12</sup> These periods are so broad that Williams at one point even refers to 'the recent contemporary' (into which Roberts's poetry would fall).<sup>13</sup> Wheatley

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<sup>9</sup> Wheatley, *Contemporary British Poetry*, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Robinson, 'Introduction: The Limits and Openness of the Contemporary', in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Poetry*, ed. by Peter Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 1-17 (p. 3).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>12</sup> Nerys Williams, *Contemporary Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4

gives the movement its narrowest scope, identifying the beginning of contemporary poetry with the publication of Ian Hamilton's *Oxford Companion to Twentieth Century Poetry* and the New Generation issue of *Poetry Review* in 1994.<sup>14</sup>

By the margin of a year, Wheatley's start date coincides with the publication of Roberts's first full collection *Soft Keys* in 1993, and in this thesis, contemporary poetry will initially come to mean poetry that is broadly speaking contemporaneous with the publication of Roberts's first and most recent collections between 1993 and 2013. As this timeframe is congruent with all three of the above suggestions, Roberts's poetry is by all three accounts contemporary in terms of the period of its publication. As such, after having identified the particular signatures of Roberts's poetry, it will then be possible to read the grouping of contemporary poetry as a whole in light of these defining features. In fact, the construction of the discourse of contemporary poetry is something this thesis aims to take part in by suggesting that some of the signatures of Roberts's poetry are emblematic of characteristics occurring across the wider contemporary poetry situation.

The chief of these characteristics is the way in which Roberts's poetry, informed by his tactile poetics, appears to represent, thematically and stylistically, a metaphysical poetry of the twenty-first century. This comes about in the way in which the touchable, material and corporeal elements of Roberts's poetry are consistently correlated with notions of the untouchable, immaterial, or incorporeal.

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<sup>14</sup> Wheatley, *Contemporary British Poetry*, p. 1.

There is a constant concern (a frequently religious concern) regarding the way in which the touchable touches on the untouchable, or the physical bears on the metaphysical and vice versa. The term 'metaphysical' also comes to play on a number of other meanings, from the spiritual and philosophical to a poetic engagement with the Metaphysical poetry of the sixteenth century. In the remainder of this introduction, I will consider the methodology which has identified these qualities, and the way this thesis engages with the broader haptic discourse. This is followed by a literature review of critical work written on Roberts's poetry to date, which establishes the contribution this close reading will be making to that discourse in particular. The introduction will be concluded by a chapter breakdown.

### **Methodology: The Language of Touch**

Typically, a thesis methodology describes the approach taken by which a research question is answered; and in this thesis, the three central chapters methodologically constitute a comprehensive close reading of the poetry of Michael Symmons Roberts. However, due to the privileging of the close reading as the primary methodological approach in this project, a reversal takes place. Effectively, the methodology comes to precede the research question and informs its theoretical direction. Adam Piette writes in the chapter 'Contemporary Poetry and Close Reading':

Poetry is the arena for the textual voice as compact of affect, history, and culture, a zone where private languages of feeling, where contact with the other, or solitary engagement with an object of desire, can be performed within a semi-public realm, thus creating lines of communication between the subject and cultural history, historical culture. Nothing is off bounds in a poem, which can touch the nerves of the unconscious as well as the lineaments of international history. The key here is that what poetry does happens in compacted form within lines, or as distributed across the page. As a genre therefore, its only appropriate reading style is close reading. Close reading is a habit of attention to the ways the different kinds of material come together in the formal design. The close reading analysis simply separates out the elements so they become plainer to see.<sup>15</sup>

It is only through 'seperat[ing] out the elements' that intersect in the poetry — from the level of the poem's language and form to its various critical and historical contexts — that research questions about Roberts's poetry in terms of 'affect, history, and culture' or 'the nerves of the unconscious' can begin to emerge in the first place.

While close reading continues to constitute an important tool in most textual analyses, for anyone writing after the theoretical turn it is important to consider the way in which one's close reading also negotiates critical demands, and to identify the approach where possible by name. In some ways, there is no clear way to do this here. While the following thesis draws repeatedly on the writing of Jacques Derrida for instance, it would be wrong to call it deconstructionist; and despite the fact that there are discussions of Freudian theory, neither is it psychoanalytical

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<sup>15</sup> Piette, p. 238.

exactly. Different theoretical approaches are engaged with as and when the close reading demands it in terms of the language used or the concerns raised in the poetry. What underpins the entire project is the way in which these different discourses are brought into contact by the particular attention to haptics that Roberts's poetry invites. The thesis does no more than (and as much as) touch on these different theories in order to establish what is at stake in the language of touch in Roberts's writing. What occurs in turn is that a particular haptic movement eventually emerges from Roberts's poetry (the 'metaxu'), which retrospectively theorises the reading that has taken place. This metaxical theory, which predominantly informs Roberts's writing on touch, does not precede the close reading as such but emerges from it and makes its contribution to the wider haptic discourse. The relationship between close reading and theory will be considered further in the following paragraphs.

Thomas Day terms as 'loving specificity', the emphasis placed on physical, sensory detail in Roberts's poetry.<sup>16</sup> The specificity of these details lies in the way they are figured to appeal to the senses. This occurs across the full range of Roberts's poetry and across the full range of the senses, from the sense of smell ('Angel of the Perfumes' *SK*, 1) to the sense of taste ('Carnivorous-II' *C*, 20), and from sight ('Ultramarine' *RS*, 62) to sound ('Malchus' *SK*, 30). Poems such as 'Messiaen in Görlitz' (*SK*, 2) even have as their focus the phenomenon of synaesthesia, a mingling of the senses — in this case the experience of musical sound experienced

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas Day, 'Food for Thought: Bodily and Spiritual Matter in Michael Symmons Roberts's *Corpus*', *New Walk*, 2 (2011), 36-38 (p.36).



as colourful visuals. However, what stands out in particular is the extensive way in which the sense of touch is used.

In his seminal work *Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin* (1971), Ashley Montagu identifies the extent to which the significance of tactile experience has implicated itself in the English language as a whole:

That the importance in human behaviour of the tactile functions of the skin has not gone wholly unrecognised is evident from the many expressions in common parlance in which reference is made to them. We speak of 'rubbing' people the wrong way, and 'stroking' them the right way; of 'abrasive' and 'prickly' personalities. We speak of 'the personal touch', meaning something more than a perfunctory act, the person's own idiom, essentially his personality expressing itself by 'getting in touch'. [...] Things are either 'palpably' or 'tangibly' so or not. The 'feel' of a thing is in many ways important to us. Anything gummy, adhesive, or sticky to the touch is 'tacky'. Our 'feeling' for others embodies much of the kind of experience which we have ourselves undergone through the skin. A deeply felt experience is 'touching'.<sup>17</sup>

Even in this short extract, Montagu demonstrates the extensive range a tactile vocabulary can encompass. Following on from this, in this thesis, the language of touch in the first place consists of any linguistic figures related to the organs of touch ('the hand or finger, or some other part of the body'), textures, and 'the action or an act of touching' itself (*OED*). This means that the close readings

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<sup>17</sup> I have included only some of Montagu's examples by way of example as the full reference is too extensive. See Ashley Montagu, *Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin*, third edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), pp. 10-11.

performed throughout this project identify those textual figurations which constitute a use of the language of touch as ones 1) in which the organs of touch are used or depicted, 2) in which textures are identified or the language of the poem itself feels textured in a particular way, and 3) in which any acts of touching are performed, including contact between two bodies, surfaces or ideas. Physical contact encompasses a range of tactile experiences, including surface texture, pressure, tension, pain, and temperature. In Roberts's poetry, the mechanics of touch also extend beyond human contact to include the touching of urban and rural spaces, public and personal spheres. Crucially, as a practicing Roman Catholic and someone who repeatedly engages with questions of religion and faith in the full range of his writing, Roberts's poetry is frequently marked by attempts to stage a touching of the untouchable, whether the untouchable is the soul or a more general notion of the divine.

Throughout Roberts's poetry, tactile language and themes are structured by specifically Christian tropes. This happens in terms of diverse but key Christian thinkers and figures (such as Simone Weil, the prophet Hosea and the composer Olivier Messiaen); the use of liturgical days on the Christian calendar; and a broader incorporation of traditional Christian iconography figured in contemporary imagery. One example of the latter is the messianic image of 'a baby sleeping deep in the hot swarf' (*SK*, 29) in the furnace of an ICI British Steel factory. Of critical importance to this thesis is the way this particular image plays on notions of the touchable and untouchable mentioned above. In the first place, the image is figured in a tactile, thermal register ('hot swarf'). However, the untouchable is also in evidence, in fact

doubly so, as the child is both physically untouchable (the speaker has to wear 'asbestos uniforms, wood shoes' *SK*, 29), and untouchable in the sense of its sacred provenance.

Other poems demonstrate the way in which Roberts's poetry is underpinned by the tension between two key tactile tropes in particular, which demonstrate the expressly Christian problematization inherent in his engagement with touch. These tropes include the way in which Doubting Thomas refuses to believe in the resurrection of Christ without first touching his wounds and the prohibition of touch from Jesus to Mary in the words *noli me tangere*, commonly translated as 'do not touch me'. On the varying quality of the contact in these two different scenes, Trish McTighe writes:

On the one hand, there is in this narrative an intimate contact, an intense, penetrating touch between Christ and Thomas. On the other, there is the tactful withdrawal of the *noli me tangere* scene. In the Thomas scene, touch, the insertion of the finger in the wound is the absolute verifier of presence, a moment of haptic certitude. Yet, for Mary Magdalene, touch is not permitted.<sup>18</sup>

The way in which touch becomes associated with religious doubt by way of Thomas's gesture and the prohibition to touch made to Mary are connected to a paradoxical demand made on the subject in many of Roberts's poems to touch the

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<sup>18</sup> Trish McTighe, 'Noli Me Tangere: Haptic Certitude in Beckett's *Eh Joe* and *Nacht und Träume*', *Modern Drama*, 55 (2012), 216-229 (p. 219).

untouchable. As such, the question ‘*How to touch upon the untouchable?*’ serves as a leading line of inquiry into the mechanics of Robert’s poetry. McTighe’s own analysis also forms part of a reading of the work of the contemporary French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy with whose writing the question of ‘*How to touch upon the untouchable?*’ and this thesis are further bound up.

The question is in fact posed in this particular form by Jacques Derrida in *On Touching — Jean-Luc Nancy* (2005). *On Touching* is a broad review of the philosophy of touch, with a particular focus on Nancy’s philosophy.<sup>19</sup> In *On Touching*, Derrida engages with a longstanding tradition of metaphysical speculation on the sense of touch. This tradition can be said to begin with Aristotle’s attempt to define touch in *De Anima*, in which touch is posited as being so fundamental to existence that it can hardly be considered a sense at all.<sup>20</sup> More recently, touch has been the subject of philosophical inquiry by a range of thinkers from Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Luce Irigaray to Julia Kristeva.<sup>21</sup> If the works of Derrida and Nancy assume a particular centrality in this work however, then this is because their concerns reflect most directly those which Roberts’s poetry also engages with. Furthermore, Derrida’s and Nancy’s thoughts on touch have come to bear on several recent works of poetry criticism, which have the figuration of touch

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<sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida, *On Touching — Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. by Christine Irizarry (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> Aristotle, *De Anima (On the Soul)*, trans. by Hugh Lawson-Tancred (London: Penguin Books, 1986), pp. 220-221.

<sup>21</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968); Luce Irigaray, ‘Perhaps Cultivating Touch Can Still Save Us’, *Angelaki*, 40 (2011), 130-140; Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

as their focus, and this thesis builds to a certain extent on this work,<sup>22</sup> especially Ian Maclachlan's notion of 'remote sensing' and above all, Sarah Jackson's 'tactile poetics'.<sup>23</sup>

Both Maclachlan and Jackson draw on Derrida's and Nancy's writing to argue the extent to which both touch and the reading/writing process depends on a degree of 'interruption'. This interruption arrives through the way in which Maclachlan and Jackson emphasize the self-reflexive quality of the verb to *touch* in French (*se toucher*), 'translated by Peggy Kamuf as "to self-touch you"'. This is an ambiguity exploited by both Derrida and Nancy in their exposition of the word.<sup>24</sup> Maclachlan describes how 'in touching you I must also feel myself touching you: I must self-touch you'. As the same is true of touching oneself (I feel myself touching myself), in the end 'Like any reflexive form, the notion of "touching oneself" installs a division in the self as subject and object'.<sup>25</sup>

This inherent interruption in the verb to *touch* is further explored in what Derrida sets out under the phrase the 'law of tact', which is 'the sense of knowing how to

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<sup>22</sup> Ian Maclachlan 'Long distance Love: On remote Sensing in Shakespeare's Sonnet 109', in *Sensual reading New Approaches to reading in Its Relations to the Senses*, ed. Michael Syrontinski and Ian Maclachlan (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2001).; Trish McTighe, 'Noli Me Tangere: Haptic Certitude in Beckett's Eh Joe and Nacht und Träume', *Modern Drama*, 55 (2012), 216-229; Sarah Jackson, *Tactile Poetics: Touch and Contemporary Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

<sup>23</sup> Maclachlan, p. 58; Sarah Jackson, 'The Textual Skin: Towards a Tactile Poetics' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sussex, 2009), p. 82. Jackson's monograph (2015) has been published too close to the thesis submission date to obtain, so I will be referring throughout this thesis to her PhD.

<sup>24</sup> Maclachlan, p. 58; see also Jackson, 'The Textual Skin', p. 124.

<sup>25</sup> Maclachlan, p. 58

touch *without* touching, without touching *too much*, where touching is already too much'.<sup>26</sup> The 'law of tact' describes the way in which every touch involves the movement towards the object ('to touch'), as well as a degree of holding back ('*without* touching, without touching *too much*'). Without both corresponding actions, a touch crosses the limit, becomes inappropriate, invasive or abusive. In a physical sense, the limit being crossed might be represented by breaking the skin. As well as playing on this sense of being tactful, Derrida is suggesting that central to the mechanics of any contact is a correlative degree of noncontact. He describes the way in which the interplay of the two antagonistic forces involved in touch 'in effect installs a kinship that is at the same time *conjunctive* and *disjunctive*'.<sup>27</sup> The context for Derrida's discussion of the 'law of tact' is a passage in *On Touching* concerning Nancy's 'tactile corpus', a list of tactile verbs he includes in his book *Corpus*.<sup>28</sup> Derrida negotiates the way Nancy includes in his sequence a series of words ('letting go', 'avoiding'), which 'rather than touching seem, on the contrary, literally to signify noncontact, interruption, spacing, a hiatus at the core of contact'.<sup>29</sup> This paradoxical inclusion of noncontact in contact is central to both Derridean and Nancyan mechanics of touch. As Nancy writes of the contact performed between the body and writing: 'Writing touches upon bodies *along the absolute limit* separating the sense of the one from the skin and nerves of the other. Nothing *gets through*, which is why it touches'.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, p. 67.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>28</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. by Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 93.

<sup>29</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, p. 70.

<sup>30</sup> Nancy, *Corpus*, p. 11.

This self-reflexive sense of division and the emphasis on interruption corresponds strongly to Roberts's own mechanics of touch. In the poem 'Malchus' for instance, the servant of the high priest, Malchus, has his ear cut off by Jesus's disciple Peter in the garden of Gethsemane. In this famous biblical scene, Jesus picks the ear up and reattaches it. In the corresponding passage in the Gospel of Luke, particular reference is made to touch, as Jesus simply 'touched his ear and healed him' (Luke, 22. 51). However, in the poem, the precise moment of touch narrated in the Bible ('And he touched his ear') is elided. As in Luke, the reader is privy to the moment before ('an ear cut off to foil an abduction') followed closely by the moment after ('an immediate healing'). The moment of touch itself however is not described, but rather circumscribed through a visual simile, which likens 'the whole | scene' to 'a plane that flies so low | it blocks the afternoon sun for an instant | then releases it'. Similarly, the title poem in the collection *Soft Keys* shows a similar elision when it speculates on the movement from thought to written word through the hand (SK, 10):

As we praise the timing of quartz,  
the keys to praise are held by birds  
who scutter over their majors and minors  
for he who unlocks hell and heaven.  
The key to those binary soft ons and offs  
of a computer is a single finger's  
weight which teeters on the edge of thought,

the edge of a letter being born – it was. (SK, 10)

The poem has a multiplying effect, when it lists binary ('majors and minors') after binary ('hell and heaven') after binary ('ons and offs'), before contrasting these with the singular ('single finger'). The 'single finger's | weight' in turn is juxtaposed with 'thought'. The evidence of their contact is in the fact that touchable (finger) and untouchable (thought) produce a knock-on effect, a sequence of 'thought' — 'finger's | weight' — 'letter', even if each in turn is connected to the other by nothing more than its 'edge'. In this case, the precise moment of touch is once again foregone and substituted by a dash.

Finally, the degree of impenetrability inferred in Nancy's phrase 'Nothing *gets through*, which is why it touches' can be recognised in the emphasis on separation in the following lines from Roberts's poem 'What Divides Us': 'Skin is border country. | Ever exiled from each other, | we come here to meet' (C, 41). These lines illustrate the way in which Roberts's conception of touch works on a principle of separation, and that contact can only occur if things are divided from one another in the first place. Thus, in Roberts's poetry, division is a *condition* of touch in both senses of the word: 'a convention, stipulation, proviso', but also a 'mode of being, state, position, nature' (*OED*). Rather than convey what Trish McTighe terms 'haptic certitude', the haptic in Roberts's poetry contains in it always the uncertainty of separation.<sup>31</sup> This becomes most clearly articulated in Roberts's engagement with

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<sup>31</sup> McTighe, p. 219.



the philosophical and theological writings of French thinker and activist Simone Weil and in particular her notion of the 'metaxu'. When Weil describes the metaxical connection to God as one by which 'every separation is a link', this mirrors the same mechanism at work in Roberts's idea that 'Ever exiled from each other, | we come here to meet'.<sup>32</sup>

In the methodology of this thesis, the structural similarities between the Derridean and Nancyan reading of touch become the starting point by which to theorise the mechanics of touch in Robert's poetry. However, there is an important sense in which Roberts's poetry then re-informs the discourse when reading it in terms of the metaxical thinking it invites. In Roberts's poetry, there is for one thing a stronger correlation with the English language construction of the phrase *I touch you* than with the reflexive structure in the French. In English, *I* and *you* are simultaneously separated and joined by the word *touch*, and initially engage in a straightforward subject-object binary. The attention falls less on the complicating self-reflexive nature of touch, or even the *I* or the *you* doing the touching, than the manner in which touch mediates between two points in a binary, constituting *touch* as the word *through* which contact occurs. As will be demonstrated, in Roberts's poetry all touching becomes a touching-*through*. In this sense, by using Roberts's poetry as the starting point, the language of touch expands on the largely philosophical framework of Jackson's 'tactile poetics' and Maclachlan's 'remote

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<sup>32</sup> Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. by Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr, Routledge Classics (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 145.

sensing', and occupies new ground by moving towards a theologically and philosophically informed metaxical understanding.

The effect of the varying theoretical structures on the methodological approach can be illustrated by the following example. In 'So Close: Writing That Touches', Jackson uses Nancy's assertion that 'Nothing *gets through*, which is why it touches' as a means by which to justify both the title of the article ('Writing That Touches') and the following invitation to her reader: 'Let the skin of this essay rub against you. Let this writing touch you. Touch back'.<sup>33</sup> It is tempting to make a similar move with regard to the idea of close reading: how close can close reading be? Can it touch? Is there a 'Reading That Touches'? However, this is a gesture this thesis has not been willing to complete, a refusal which can be explained by the very metaxical approach it begins to feel from the beginning of its close readings, even though it is only articulated as such towards the end. In Roberts's writing, the reader does not touch the poem, and the poem does not touch the reader. As a 'metaxu', the poem is what is touched-*through*; and what is ultimately touched on *through* the poem is the untouchable — or, as will be identified in the next section, what Roberts identifies in his own terms as the 'metaphysical'.

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<sup>33</sup> Sarah Jackson, 'So Close: Writing That Touches', *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*, 9 (2012), 408-418 (p. 409).

## Critical Discourse on the Poetry of Michael Symmons Roberts

The following section identifies the extent to which preoccupations within the existing critical discourse on Roberts's poetry tie in with the research questions of this thesis regarding what is at stake in Roberts's haptic concerns, and how his attention to the language of touch speaks to the broader contemporary milieu and contemporary poetry in particular. In this context, the notion of the 'metaphysical' is recognised as point of intersection between poetic tradition, a particular line of philosophical inquiry and the question of what it means to be a religious poet in a secular age. This section also intends to clarify the thesis-position on the use of the wide range of sources the investigation necessitates.

Roberts's poetry includes the collections *Soft Keys* (1993), *Raising Sparks* (1999), *Burning Babylon* (2001), *Corpus* (2004), *The Half Healed* (2008) and *Drysalter* (2013), as well as the pamphlet *His Maker's Maker* (2002) and a collaboration with the artist Simon Burder, the artist's book *Limekilns* (2002). Chapter 2 considers *Edgelands* (2012), a collaboration with the poet Paul Farley, which, despite being a non-fiction book, is considered in several critiques of contemporary poetry. Despite the volume of his creative material, secondary sources on Roberts's work within the field of academic criticism are few. This might in part be explained by the fact that as a contemporary writer, simply not enough time has elapsed for a critical body of writing on Roberts's work to accrue. As indicated above, significant studies have been published on several of Roberts's peers however. This in turn suggests that

Roberts's work has been critically neglected — a neglect this thesis seeks to redress and explore.

For the researcher interested in Roberts's work, the problem is the same: how to evaluate the burgeoning discourse on a poet, when that discourse is still so narrow. One strategy is to broaden the field of study of a contemporary poet such as Roberts to include non-academic sources: reviews and articles in newspapers, poetry journals and online publications. Researchers can also include the reflections of one of the major contributors to the discourse on the poetry of Michael Symmons Roberts: Roberts himself. However, journalistic criticism and auto-criticism must not be dealt with in the same way as peer-reviewed academic research. As such, part of this thesis is concerned with verifying observations by journalists, reviewers and the author himself, and evidencing these, where it is felt they are genuinely borne out in the work itself.

In order to incorporate these sources within the academic discourse on Roberts's poetry, their arguments, categorisations and observations must be backed up by rigorous textual analysis and contextualisation within a critical framework. For instance, *metaphysical* is a word used extensively, albeit casually by reviewers to describe Roberts's poetry. However, few critics go into any detail about the particular provenance of the label, according to what criteria Roberts's poetry warrants it, or even how Roberts's poetry expands on or challenges the term. When using auto-critical material, such as Roberts's essays and articles, similar caution is

advised. This thesis has to differentiate carefully between the poetic and intellectual traditions in which Roberts positions himself through intertextual signposting, and those which evidentially underpin the work, but which the poetry does not go out of its way to emphasize. Similarly, with regard to the categorisation of Roberts's poetry as metaphysical, his own refutation of the label comprises a useful critical outlining of the term's parameters with which to engage (see below). However, Roberts's own judgement as to whether his poetry is metaphysical or not is ultimately incidental.

My research has uncovered two peer-reviewed articles on Roberts's poetry. Both consider radically different aspects of his work, although both centre on the collection *Corpus* and around the way textual and physical bodies are figured in Roberts's poetry. Joanna Luft's article 'Roberts's "To John Donne" and Donne's "Elegy 19"' (2010) consists of a comparative reading of the two poems in the title, while Angelica Michelis's 'Rhyming Hunger: Poetry, Love and Cannibalism' focuses on the poem sequence 'Food for Risen Bodies'.<sup>34</sup> Even though the thematic focus is radically different — private ownership of the body through scientific patenting on the one hand, the role of eating in poetry on the other — both demonstrate how in Roberts's poetry the body is marked by a degree of precariousness. Michelis writes on the collection *Corpus*:

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<sup>34</sup> Joanna Luft, 'Roberts's "To John Donne" and Donne's "Elegy 19"', in *The Explicator*, 68 (2010), 144-147; Angelica Michelis, 'Rhyming Hunger: Poetry, Love and Cannibalism', in *Revista Canaria De Estudios Ingleses*, 60 (2010), 61-78.

Instead of being confronted with stable and fixed bodies, it is the idea of the body in flux, in pieces and under construction that dominates the poetic framework of this collection.<sup>35</sup>

Luft illustrates this by playing off against each other the textual representation of the body in DNA coding against the tactile exchange of lovers and the reclamation of the scientifically-owned, physio-textual body through religious liturgy. Michelis similarly demonstrates that the limits of the body, particularly the limits between the physical body and the textual body, the corporeal and the incorporeal, are constantly compromised and that Roberts's poems 'are not so much poems *about* food and eating, they are rather *performed* by the processes of ingestion and digestion'.<sup>36</sup>

The instability of the body, its resistance to clear delineation through textual and physical limits, is identifiable as a signature pattern in Roberts's poetry, when one opens the discourse on his work up to include non-peer-reviewed articles. Thomas Day's review of *Corpus* — 'Food for Thought: Bodily and Spiritual Matter in Michael Symmons Roberts's *Corpus*' (2011) — goes into considerable detail to identify the physical and textual body as a site of uncertainty, rather than solid guarantees. Fiona Sampson looks at the same set of poems as Michelis and Day when she uses Roberts's engagement with religious imagery to group Roberts under the category of 'mythopoesis' in *Beyond the Lyric: A Map of Contemporary British Poetry* (2012). Sampson extends the ambiguity identified by the above-mentioned critics in terms

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<sup>35</sup> Michelis, 'Rhyming Hunger', p. 70.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

of Roberts's use of the body, to the wider position he takes in respect to other religious imagery as a Catholic poet. Sampson writes:

His work is characterized by gestures towards possible forms of thought, rather than thumping statement, as if echoing the ways in which faith is more often a series of states of hopefulness than an absolute experience.<sup>37</sup>

Like Sampson, Day also notices the way in which Roberts's poetry lists away from 'absolutes' towards a sense of 'poetry's unknowability'.<sup>38</sup> One of this thesis's main contributions is to extend the above discussion of Roberts's work, currently limited to *Corpus*, to his other collections. Through the extension of the discussion, the motifs identified here such as the tension between physical and textual corpus can be developed and evidenced across a broader range of tropes in Roberts's poetry than just the body.

It is not completely accurate to say though, that critical attention on Roberts's work is solely confined to *Corpus*. There is, for instance, work on the non-fiction book *Edgelands*, including Kevin McNeilly's lecture 'Listening in the Margins: Kathleen Jamie, Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts' (2011), peer-reviewed pieces such as Wheatley's *Contemporary British Poetry* (2015) and Deborah Lilley's article 'Kathleen Jamie: rethinking the externality and idealisation of nature' (2013).

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<sup>37</sup> Fiona Sampson, *Beyond the Lyric: A Map of Contemporary British Poetry* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2012), p. 153.

<sup>38</sup> Day, 'Food for Thought', p.38.

Lilley's discussion of Roberts's writing extends to little more than using his work as a frame of reference to background her discussion of Jamie.<sup>39</sup> Wheatley echoes something of the above discussion, in particular the question around the capacity for Roberts's writing to productively engage with uncertainty. However, Wheatley argues the reverse of Sampson and Day, for whom Roberts's poetry tends towards the unfamiliar. For Wheatley, the non-fiction errs on the side of 'naturalisation', rather than 'estrangement'.<sup>40</sup> McNeilly, in turn, is much more in line with the discourse as a whole and its emphasis on instability and uncertainty in Roberts's work, by claiming that Roberts and his contemporaries Jamie and Farley, 'don't so much seek out determinable meanings as they aim to inhabit the work of meaning-making itself'.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, there is a vast range of journalistic criticism, in the form of book reviews, much of it by reputable academics, successful poets and other writers.<sup>42</sup> I have chosen the reviews used in this thesis for the way they draw attention to one thing in particular, which is the way that a certain vocabulary has emerged around

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<sup>39</sup> Deborah Lilley, 'Kathleen Jamie: rethinking the externality and idealisation of nature', *Green Letters*, 17 (2013), 16-26 (p.18).

<sup>40</sup> Wheatley, *Contemporary British Poetry*, p. 149.

<sup>41</sup> Kevin McNeilly, 'Listening in the Margins: Kathleen Jamie, Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts', presented at the "Acoustic Communication and Soundscape Design" symposium at Green College, UBC, 16 September 2011, p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> Anne Compton, 'Michael Symmons Roberts: Grounded and Grand', *Arc Poetry Magazine*, 64 (2010), 74-80; Chris Arnot, 'Nuclear Families', *Guardian*, 28 February 2001; John Burnside, 'Where the Wild Things Are', *The Times*, 5 February 2011; Charlotte Higgins, 'Michael Symmons Roberts wins Forward prize', *Guardian*, 1 October 2013; Cassandra Jardine, 'The poet who was inspired by the recorded farewells of the doomed', *The Daily Telegraph*, 10 September 2002; Robert Macfarlane, 'Edgelands by Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts - review', *Guardian*, 19 February 2011; Sameer Rahim, 'Drysalter, by Michael Symmons Roberts, review', *Telegraph*, 3 October 2013; Jennifer Rohn, 'Rhyme and Reason', in *The Scientist*, 17 August 2007; Gerard Smyth, 'Michael Symmons Roberts: a religious poet in the secular age', *Irish Times*, 25 September 2014; David Wheatley, 'Messages from the Conflict Zone', *The Guardian*, 11 October 2008.



Roberts's work, employed by his publishers and reviewers, that means he is written about in terms of the metaphysical. Themes such as the ambiguities of the body, as set out in the peer-reviewed discourse outlined above, tie into this wider language of the physical and the metaphysical, the touchable and untouchable, which is the major preoccupation of this thesis.

The other source of criticism on Roberts's work is the critical writing of Roberts himself. Roberts sets out his position as a poet in the article 'Poetry in a Post-Secular Age', published in *Poetry Review* in 2008, and a development of the same article, titled 'Contemporary Poetry and Belief', published in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Poetry* in 2013.<sup>43</sup> Its themes are also picked up in a book chapter and two shorter articles written in the intervening period. These include 'The Poet's Tale' in *Redcrosse: Remaking Religious Poetry For Today's World* (2008), a commentary about his role in the writing of a contemporary liturgy, and two pieces on the poet David Jones, 'Freeing the Waters – Poetry In A Parched Culture' and 'Poetry's Invisible Genius'.<sup>44</sup>

The original article begins with the question '*How can contemporary poets explore religious faith and experience in a secularised language and culture?*'.<sup>45</sup> The role of

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<sup>43</sup> Michael Symmons Roberts, 'Poetry in a Post-Secular Age', *Poetry Review*, 98 (2008), 69-75; Michael Symmons Roberts, 'Contemporary Poetry and Belief', in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Poetry*, ed. by Peter Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 694-706.

<sup>44</sup> Michael Symmons Roberts, 'The Poet's Tale', in *Redcrosse: Remaking Religious Poetry For Today's World*, ed. by Ewan Fernie (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 93-102; Michael Symmons Roberts, 'Freeing the Waters – Poetry In A Parched Culture', *The Paper*, 7 (2003); Michael Symmons Roberts, 'Poetry's invisible genius', *Telegraph*, 28 September 2002.

<sup>45</sup> Roberts, 'Poetry in a Post-Secular Age', p. 69.

the contemporary poet in relation to the use of secularised language is a driving question of Roberts's poetry as a whole. By way of illustration, Roberts cites Seamus Heaney repeatedly when he talks about 'the big lightening, the emptying out' of religious language.<sup>46</sup> Heaney is describing a sense by which language begins to lose its full range of connotations as society becomes increasingly secular. As an example of this, Roberts uses the modernist poet David Jones's description of the way in which a poet can no longer be sure whether or not the cross or baptism will be evoked for a contemporaneous reader through the use of the words 'wood' and 'water'.<sup>47</sup> Rather than lament this thinning out of language however, Roberts sees this as an opportunity for the contemporary poet 'to find new terms, new metaphors'.<sup>48</sup> This involves, for instance, seizing opportunities offered by scientific events such as the mapping of the human genome, which is so new that the discourse's vocabulary has not yet been determined. As Roberts writes 'when the old symbols are losing their purchase, the field is wide open'.<sup>49</sup>

Roberts identifies the way in which his line of inquiry is bound up with the definition of his own poetry, writing that for 'contemporary poets who want to explore or reflect something of this area of human struggle and experience we used to call "religious"', there is a 'terminology problem'.<sup>50</sup> Roberts rejects the term 'religious poetry' on the same grounds as T.S. Eliot, who argued that the expression

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 69.; Roberts, 'Freeing the Waters', para. 3 of 17.

<sup>47</sup> Roberts, 'Poetry in a Post-Secular Age', p. 69.; Roberts, 'Contemporary Poetry and Belief', p. 695; Roberts, 'Freeing the Waters', para. 2 of 17.; Roberts, 'Poetry's invisible genius', para. 16 of 19.

<sup>48</sup> Roberts, 'Poetry in a Post-Secular Age', p.71.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

suggested a poetry limited to religious issues alone, as opposed to a form of writing, that treats 'the whole subject of poetry in a religious spirit'.<sup>51</sup> For similar reasons, Roberts dismisses the term 'spiritual' for being 'almost entirely stripped of meaning', and the word 'sacred' for being 'untouchable, devotional and precious'.<sup>52</sup> Instead, Roberts writes principally in terms of 'post-secular poetry'.<sup>53</sup> For Roberts, the term 'post-secular' reflects the way in which the movement of the culturally anticipated demise of religion in the face of secularism fails to occur: 'The enlightenment project was meant to see off religion by now, but instead many sociologists argue that it is secularism that's in retreat'.<sup>54</sup> The post-secular denotes the sense in which, in the contemporary age, it is necessary to generate a milieu in which materialist, secular positions can engage in meaningful conversation with faith-based, religious ones, rather than compete. For Jürgen Habermas, who coined the phrase, 'if all is to go well, both sides, each from its own viewpoint, must accept an interpretation of the relation between faith and knowledge that enables them to live together in a self-reflective manner'.<sup>55</sup> Roberts attempts this negotiation by situating his writing around areas of concrete, physical experience, such as the body, which serve as a 'kind of common ground' and by rooting his poetry in 'the concrete detail of shared experience'. In this sense he is taking up William Carlos Williams's 'famous maxim "no ideas but in things"'.<sup>56</sup> However, for Roberts, the

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<sup>51</sup> Eliot cited in Roberts, 'Poetry in a Post-Secular Age', p. 70. Originally in T.S. Eliot, 'Religion and Literature' (1935), in T.S. Eliot, *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. by Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 99.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>55</sup> Jürgen Habermas, 'Notes on Post-Secular Society', *New Perspectives Quarterly*, 25 (2008), 17–29 (p. 29).

<sup>56</sup> Roberts, 'Poetry in a Post-Secular Age', p. 72.

‘concrete’ is also the ‘incarnational’, and his incarnational poetics, which concentrate on physical detail, are underpinned by a consistently Christian tropography, as the above has already begun to show.<sup>57</sup>

While Roberts’s own critical writing appears to position his poetry as post-secular and incarnational, he rejects the label ‘metaphysical’:

‘Metaphysical’ doesn’t really work either. As a branch of philosophy, metaphysics is the study of reality from first principles, but (unlike poetry) it often isn’t grounded in empiricism. And its association with a group of seventeenth-century poets carries connotations of style and form as well as subject.<sup>58</sup>

Part of the argument of this thesis, however, is that according to these exact criteria, which Roberts sets out above, his poetry can in fact very convincingly be thought of as metaphysical. Roberts’s poetry is engaged thematically with Cartesian metaphysical philosophy, as well as demonstrating both stylistic and formal Metaphysical features like the conceit, and sharing key tropes with the poetry of Metaphysical poets such as Vaughan and Donne. In fact, Roberts himself does not entirely give up the term when he writes that ‘the challenge for contemporary “poetry of belief” is to become the sort of language that opens on to the metaphysical, rather than shutting it down’.<sup>59</sup> Precisely the term’s polyvalence makes it so applicable to Roberts’s poetry. The word’s difficulty means it comes to

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>59</sup> Roberts, ‘Contemporary Poetry and Belief’, p. 698.

reflect most accurately the challenges exemplified in Roberts's poetry when it tries to figure the act of touching on the untouchable, of opening the physical up to the metaphysical.

It is in this way that Roberts's own critical framing of contemporary poetry informs the discussion of this thesis. The fact that Roberts follows a certain line of critical inquiry does not warrant its inclusion alone. The radical orthodoxy of John Milbank and Catharine Pickstock, which he also cites frequently for instance, is not employed here, while the writings of Rowan Williams are. The argument in this thesis is established on the basis of the close reading of the poetry, and the critical framework is ultimately one which is suggested by these readings. At times, this overlaps with Roberts's own position, and at other times it does not. A similar approach holds with regard to the use of interviews, in particular the interview with Roberts by Day in *PN Review* (2011), which is cited throughout this thesis, and is the most extensive interview with Roberts by an academic in a reputable journal to date.

## **Chapter Breakdown**

This thesis is structured into three chapters, with three, two and four subdivisions respectively. The focus of Chapter 1 is broadly concerned with *what* touches. It examines the nature of the physical and metaphysical binary components involved in touching the untouchable. Chapter 2 in turn focuses on the limits and edges of

these binary components and the point at which touch occurs. Finally, Chapter 3 offers four case studies in which Roberts's poetry attempts to touch on the untouchable.

Chapter 1: Figuring the Touchable and Untouchable is divided into three sections, each exploring a key constellation of the touchable and the untouchable in Roberts's poetry. The first section — Shell and Spark: Tactile Realism and Symbolism in Incarnational Poetics — pays particular attention to the collection *Raising Sparks*. In this collection, the shell is figured as a symbol of physical exteriority, while always being suggestive of a correlative interiority, the spark. In this chapter section, the constellation of shell and spark is established as a blueprint for other similar constellations of touchable and untouchable in Roberts's work.

The template offered by the shell also exemplifies a particular engagement with both the work of the Metaphysical poet Henry Vaughan and the Modernist poet David Jones. The engagement with Vaughan begins the consideration of Roberts as a Metaphysical poet of the twenty-first century, while the consideration of Jones demonstrates the extent to which Roberts's poetry is capable of employing the Christian symbolism that underpins his writing, while still being able to address a contemporary readership for whom this symbolic language is no longer common currency. I will argue that the use of Christian symbols demonstrates the extent to which the constellation of shell and spark is also reflected in the stylistic use of a tactile realist language to figure Metaphysical symbols. This will be explored under

the term incarnational poetry. Framed by the writings of theologian Alison Milbank, it will be established how Roberts's incarnational poetics attempt to open onto the metaphysical from the physical.

In the second subdivision of Chapter 1 — Machine and Ghost: Negotiating Cartesian Dualism in *Drysalter* (2013) — the constellation of physical and metaphysical under investigation is that of the ghost and the machine, as portrayed extensively in the cyborgian imagery of the collection *Drysalter*. The figure of ghost in the machine marks a particular engagement with the metaphysical reflections of Descartes and the attempt by twentieth-century philosopher Gilbert Ryle to debunk the legacy of Cartesian mind-body dualism. One of Descartes's key concerns is how the mind or soul (immaterial, abstracted) is able to influence the body (material, concrete). In other words, Descartes is preoccupied with how something untouchable can touch on the touchable. In Ryle's project, he does not attempt to answer Descartes's inquiry, but takes issue with the question, refuting the premise on which Descartes separates mind and body to begin with. Ryle's pejorative description of Descartes's conception of mind-body interaction is 'the Ghost in the Machine'. In Roberts's own attempt to resolve the mind-body problem, it becomes increasingly clear that his poetry is not invested in any one fixed constellation of the ghost and the machine, or in privileging one over the other. Rather Roberts's poetry emphasizes the variability of their arrangement. As opposed to the way thinkers such as Donna Haraway offer the cyborg as an alternative to Cartesianism, or capitulating to a Rylean materialism in which the ghost no longer exists, Roberts's poetry insists on

the validity of Cartesian mind-body dualism as one constellation of human experience among many.

By the end of Chapter 1, it will become clear that Roberts's interest in constructing variable binaries of the physical and metaphysical begins to generate a movement from one to the other, which echoes the experience of being a subject consisting of both physical and metaphysical parts. This becomes particularly pronounced in the final constellation in section three — Body and Soul: Writing into the Gaps between the Corporeal and Spiritual. In this section, a similar pattern is established by which the different historical positionings of body and soul, both metaphysical and Metaphysical in nature, are staged. Taking as its starting point the collection *Corpus*, these arrangements are revealed to be often contradictory, so that sometimes the soul is housed in the body and sometimes the body is housed in the soul. Thus, a shared pattern is established between the configurations of the shell and the spark, the ghost and the machine, and the body and the soul: the attention on what constitutes corporeal-incorporeal binaries in Roberts's work is principally on the movement or the space between them and not the components themselves.

Chapter 2: Exposing the Limits and Edges of Touch focuses on the notion of 'the between'. Continuing with the textual analysis of the collection *Corpus*, the first section — Twenty-first-Century Metaphysical Poetry: At the Limit of the Conceit — unpacks the Metaphysical style of Roberts's use of the conceit (influenced especially by the poetry of Donne and Eliot), by which two far-flung ideas are forced



together into a single unit of sense. This chapter section suggests that the limit of the conceit is the point at which Roberts pushes his tactile, metaphorical language beyond its own sense. It is also the point in the language of touch in which the tensions between language and touch, and their inability to cross into each other, is most palpably felt.

The second section of Chapter 2 — Between Spaces: Blurring Edges in ‘Edgelands’ — explores the limit between rural and urban spaces as figured by Roberts under the term ‘edgelands’. The sense of edginess in Roberts’s poetry exemplifies a resistance to clear delineation both between geographical spaces, but also in terms of genre categorisation. In the case of both chapter sections, the limit and the edge where touch is supposed to occur seems to demonstrate a distinct failure of contact. In particular, Derrida’s understanding of the limit becomes of critical importance in framing the mechanics of touch at this point and, alongside the Nancyan notion of exposition, helps to frame how touching the untouchable works in Roberts’s poetry: rather than involving static boundaries, touch becomes a matter of constant movement and destabilising exchanges.

Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 establish the mechanics by which the touchable comes to touch upon the untouchable in Roberts’s poetry. The final chapter (Four Case Studies — ‘How to Touch upon the Untouchable’) considers four further examples in which touching the untouchable occurs. These discussions are contextualised by four key issues in contemporary poetry criticism. The first section — ‘Voice-prints’:

Lyric Touch in 'Last Words' (2002) — considers the way in which the answerphone messages of victims of 9/11 are figured in Roberts's poetry as 'voice-prints' from the victims to their relatives, as well as from the poem to the reader. The poem sequence 'Last Words' from *The Half Healed* becomes a place where contact between personal and public spaces occurs. It engages with a contemporary poetry discourse in which the critical interest in readings of lyric address has shifted from questions concerning the identity of the speaker *I*, to the identity of the addressee *you*.

The second section — Caring not Mourning: Touching the Dead and the Corpse Poem in *Corpus* (2003) — considers the way in which the proliferation of untouchable corpses in Roberts's poetry demand to be touched. Furthermore, the demand of these corpses to be touched is marked by a correlative sense of resistance, and it is only by acknowledging the ambiguity of touch that proper care for the dead can be enacted. The third section — Contamination: Cold War Poetics in *Burning Babylon* (2001) — in turn explores the way in which radioactive touch, or rather the fear of nuclear contamination is instrumental in constituting physical boundaries in the disputed territory of Greenham Common during the Cold War. However, touch in *Burning Babylon* is also remarkable for the fact that it is not registered on contact, and for the way that untouchable radioactive touch is able to subvert physical barriers. The last section — 'Metaxu': Simone Weil's Touch in *Soft Keys* (1993) — considers the Weilean notion of 'metaxu'. In Weilean thought, a 'metaxu' both separates and connects a person to God. This last chapter section considers the way in which the process of touching the untouchable in Roberts's

poetry reveals the poem itself to be a kind of 'metaxu', which both makes contact with and points towards what lies beyond the text.

This thesis follows a general pattern, which it is helpful to keep in mind when reading. Overall, there is a methodological progression from the narrow textual-analytical focus on Roberts's poetry, towards a contextualisation of those readings within contemporary poetry discourse. While the first chapter in particular establishes the underlying mechanics of touch at work in Roberts's poetry, those processes are then considered in terms of a wider critical milieu as the thesis proceeds.

## CHAPTER 1: FIGURING THE TOUCHABLE AND THE UNTOUCHABLE

Roberts's poetry is described on the dust jackets (DJ) of his collections as having 'metaphysical concerns' (*BB*, DJ), as being 'a metaphysical poetry, rooted in physical detail' (*HH*, DJ), and as 'journeying effortlessly through physical and metaphysical landscapes' (*DS*, DJ). In this chapter, I will demonstrate the extent to which the notions of physical and metaphysical mark Roberts's poetry out as being engaged with a series of very specific poetic, philosophical and religious discourses, and that rather than simply describing his poetry, they are defined by it in a particular way. Roberts's writing frequently attempts to situate itself at the point where the physical ('the physical world; physical phenomena; material nature', *OED*) comes into contact with the metaphysical. I suggest it does this in terms of both the poems' themes and figures and the way that the poems' physical components relate to metaphysical aspects such as meaning. Each section in turn will consider a different set of tropes or figurations through which this relationship is explored: shell and spark, machine and ghost, body and soul.

In the first section of this chapter, I will show the extent to which Roberts's preoccupation with the binary between physical and metaphysical finds expression in his signature symbol of the shell. This in turn will act as a template for the other configurations, in which the machine and the body respectively can also be thought to act as shells. In Roberts's poetry, the shell draws on an Anglo-Welsh tradition of religious poetry that stretches from the Metaphysical poetry of Vaughan in the

seventeenth century to the modernist writing of Jones in the early twentieth century. The dialogue Roberts conducts with this tradition, throughout his body of work (but most of all in the collection *Raising Sparks*), demonstrates the way in which tactile imagery serves as a kind of bridge between different notions of the physical and the metaphysical, variously informed by poetic, philosophical and religious discourses. The tension between the touchable and the untouchable also finds its expression in the form of his writing itself. On the one hand, the tactile realism of Roberts's verse comes to serve as a shell for a range of metaphysical concerns. On the other hand, religious symbolism in turn comes to structure and contain his tactile realist descriptions. In the second section of this chapter, I investigate Roberts's engagement with the Cartesian idea of the ghost and the machine, while in section three I will show the different ways in which Roberts's poetry configures the relationship between the soul and the body. In each case, I argue that Roberts pays particular attention to the way in which the touchable and the untouchable never remain in a fixed position, but are remarkable for the variously contradictory configurations they assume in his writings.

I have already suggested that, in its broadest sense, the physical is to some extent contiguous with notions of the touchable, and the metaphysical with what is untouchable. The physical is what one can experience with one's sense of touch in the corporeal dimension, and the metaphysical includes incorporeal abstracts such as meaning, ideas and soul. Beyond its quotidian use however ('designating that which is immaterial, incorporeal, or supersensible', *OED*), the word *metaphysical* is complicated by the fact that metaphysics is 'a branch of philosophy [...] the study of

reality from first principles', with its provenance in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* in the fourth century BC.<sup>1</sup> Roberts's poetry suggests parameters which give the term a specific definition within the context of his writing. The use of the label metaphysical in relation to Roberts's poetry plays on three registers — the poetic, the philosophical and the religious — each carrying a very particular inflection and all of which intersect in the symbol of the shell.

In Roberts's poetry, the shell is a symbol of the physical exterior, but it always implies a metaphysical interior. Roberts's use of the shell (or other objects with shell functions such as clothes, clay vessels and even the body), draws on a religious tradition, which has its roots in passages such as the following from The Second Letter of Paul to the Corinthians:

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. (2 Corinthians 4. 7)<sup>2</sup>

The clay jar, in this case, is the physical container for a divine, metaphysical correlative. The idea that the physical shell becomes the way to the metaphysical correlative, or that the physical shell imprisons the metaphysical spirit, is developed extensively by Metaphysical poets. Donne for example describes how his living soul cannot make contact with the soul of a departed loved one 'whiles with the luggage of this clay | It clogged is' (*JD*, 286). In the same poem, death is described as a

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Symmons Roberts, 'Poetry in a Post-Secular Age', *Poetry Review*, 98 (2008), 69-75 (p. 70).

<sup>2</sup> Similar imagery is used in the earlier Hebrew tradition, although here the clay vessel is used to symbolise divine power: 'I will break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel.' (Jeremiah 19. 11).

liberation from the prison of the body using the symbol of the shell: 'Think thy shell broke, think thy soul hatched but now' (*JD*, 292).<sup>3</sup> The dichotomy of body and soul figured in the language of the shell and its contents furthermore becomes reflective of a specifically Cartesian metaphysics, whereby the body is the container of the mind or soul. This is reinforced by the fact that Roberts features Descartes as a figure in one of his poems (*RS*, 7) and that his writing includes the use of a Cartesian vocabulary of mind-body dualism, such as 'the ghost in the machine' (*HH*, 37). Finally, the shell allows Roberts to position the physical and the metaphysical as both a religiously informed trope, with its provenance in the clay jars of Paul, and a secular configuration, which relates to a more general experience of being a subject which has both physical and metaphysical qualities. This is achieved in part through Roberts's attention to exterior tactile detail, which is played off against universal internal processes such as thoughts and emotions. In this way, Roberts engages in particular with the poet David Jones's preoccupation with relating religious signs to a readership that no longer has access to the religious meaning of the symbols he uses. Roberts's strategy in this situation is to focus his poetry on 'the concrete detail of shared experience'.<sup>4</sup>

Paul Hills writes, that while the first wave of Jones's critics treated his art and poetry separately, the next generation was keen to emphasise the link between Jones's poetry and his material practices.<sup>5</sup> This trend is continued by a later essay

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<sup>3</sup> For further references to prisons in Donne see also: *JD* p. 42 (ll. 17-20), p. 55 (l. 78), p. 179 (l. 67), p. 185 (l. 241), p. 189 (l. 371), p. 295 (l. 249)

<sup>4</sup> Roberts, 'Poetry in a Post-Secular Age', p. 72.

<sup>5</sup> *David Jones, Artist and Poet*, ed. by Paul Hills (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1997), p. xv.

collection, *David Jones: Diversity in Unity* (2000).<sup>6</sup> The extent to which the two strands of Jones's work have in a sense always been inseparable is evidenced by the almost identical titles *David Jones: Artist and Writer* (1971) and *David Jones: Writer and Artist* (2003) published more than a quarter of a century apart.<sup>7</sup> It confirms the general view in which, as Hills writes, in Jones's poetry, 'words become things'.<sup>8</sup> Jones's writing is heavily preoccupied with the physical, 'things hard and tactile [...] the resistance of reality', while at the same time being underscored by a preoccupation with Catholic symbolism and metaphysicality. Even without being an artist himself, the same concentration on the physical, underpinned by a religious consciousness, comes to mark Roberts's own poetry.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Roberts extensively uses Jones's critical writings to articulate his position on the use of religious symbols in a supposedly secular age, so that Roberts himself becomes part of the critical culture contributing to scholarship on Jones. Part of the focus of this chapter is the particular contribution made by Roberts's poetry to the idea that, as Hills writes:

to immerse oneself in Jones's work, whether in word or image, is to revitalise sign-making and sign-recognising faculties that the contemporary world has all but destroyed.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *David Jones: Diversity in Unity*, ed. by Belinda Humfrey and Anne Price-Owen (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> David Blamires, *David Jones: Artist and Writer* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1971); Keith Alldritt, *David Jones: Writer and Artist* (London: Constable and Robinson Ltd, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Hills, p. xiv.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiv.



The sign of the shell serves to encapsulate Roberts's engagement with an Anglo-Welsh tradition of religious poetry that draws not only on Jones's poetry however, but also the poetry of Donne and Vaughan. Roberts does this in *Raising Sparks* by prefacing the book with epigraphs by Vaughan and Jones, and the poem sequence 'Quickening' (RS, 21-31) with an epigraph by Donne. The construction of this tradition is amplified in Roberts's poetry by the reference to the root of the word *skin* in 'Breton, Irish, Welsh' (C, 41); poems set in Wales such as 'The Hookses' (SK, 42-53) and the artist's book *Lime Kilns* (2002); and the poem 'Hiraeth' (DS, 64), a Welsh word translated in the poem as 'homesickness'. What these poets accentuate in particular is Roberts's interest in borders and outsiderdom. Donne, Vaughan and Jones are of Welsh heritage, writing in English, and the position of Vaughan and Jones especially is marked by a degree of marginality within respectively the Metaphysical and Modernist movements they are considered to belong to (overshadowed in turn by George Herbert and Eliot). However, in terms of touch, the marginal becomes precisely the space where touch occurs, since as Derrida writes, 'to touch is to touch a limit, a surface, a border, an outline'.<sup>11</sup> This sense of the marginal as the place where the act of touch takes place, and its connection to this Anglo-Welsh tradition, will be explored in more detail in Chapter 2. Chapter 1 will first evidence the way in which Roberts's sense of the metaphysical — informed by Metaphysical poetry, Cartesian philosophy and Jones's religious symbolism — is articulated in his poetry.

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<sup>11</sup> Jacques Derrida, *On Touching*—Jean-Luc Nancy, trans. by Christine Irizarry (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 103.

## Shell and Spark: Tactile Realism and Symbolism in Incarnational Poetics

The physical-metaphysical binary in Roberts's poetry, recognisable in his use of the shell image, is also identifiable in his formal use of poetic realism — a poetry which 'projects normal rather than extraordinary perceptions of reality' (*PEPP*, 1148) — in order to figure religious symbolism. For instance, the description of a door 'propped [...] on two crates' is, in the context of the poem 'Driftwood' (*RS*, 20), clearly a figuration of an altar, but it is rendered in a particularly quotidian manner in terms of its construction, its ordinary physical materials and the simple words themselves ('door', 'crates', 'propped'). Michael Hamburger's description of poetic realism in contemporary poetry as a 'concentration on particulars' serves as a useful description in this context,<sup>12</sup> and echoes Day's description of 'loving specificity' in Roberts's work.<sup>13</sup> Roberts's poetry is exemplary of a concentration on tactile particulars, such as when he describes 'the sensation of you whispered on my | fingertips for days' in 'Mapping the Genome (I)' (*RS*, 16). This becomes even more evident in the way that divine, metaphysical sparks are sought by hand in the physical world, as a leitmotif of the collection *Raising Sparks*. In the collection, the divine spark is generally contained in a physical shell, and these containers range from clay pots to actual seashells. In Roberts's poetry, the shell comes to serve as an important symbol of the world's physical exteriority, which correlates to different metaphysical interiorities.

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Hamburger, *The Truth of Poetry: Tensions in Modern Poetry from Baudelaire to the 1960s* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982), p. 281.

<sup>13</sup> Day, 'Food for Thought', p.36.

Hamburger asserts that ‘poetic realism is not incompatible with “symbolic discourse,” since in poetry the most concrete image tends to assume symbolic connotations’.<sup>14</sup> Both Hamburger’s statement and the reverse of this statement are true of Roberts’s poetry. Heavily preoccupied with the perceived ‘emptyings out’ of cultural and religious signs in the English language, as identified by Jones, Roberts’s writing does not take for granted that an object will ‘assume’ symbolic significance for its readers.<sup>15</sup> Instead, Roberts’s poetry concretises symbols in a tactile-realist language — making the untouchable touchable. As well as marking his poetry out as an incarnational poetics, by which the metaphysical is incarnated in the physical, this concentration on a symbol’s tactile-realist figurations makes these symbols potentially meaningful to a readership for whom the symbolic content itself is no longer a ‘common currency’.<sup>16</sup>

To illustrate this argument, I will analyse Roberts’s use of the shell motif against the background of Jones’s writings on the depletion of cultural symbols in ‘The Preface to *The Anathemata*’ (1951). I will argue that more often than not, the reader of Roberts’s poetry does not require traditional religious literacy to access a sense of the religious in his writing. It is my contention that Roberts’s use of tactile realism brings to the reader’s attention what the theologian Alison Milbank terms ‘a religious sense of the mystery of the real’ — the already extant metaphysical

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 281.

<sup>15</sup> David Jones, *Epoch and Artist* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), p. 120.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Day, ‘Food for Thought: Bodily and Spiritual Matter in Michael Symmons Roberts’s *Corpus*’, *New Walk*, 2 (2011), 36-38 (p. 55).

qualities of the physical world which religious symbolism itself draws on or points towards. This also suggests a kind of touching of the untouchable.<sup>17</sup>

In the long poem 'Smithereens', from the collection *Raising Sparks*, Roberts most clearly stages his tactile-realist search for metaphysical sparks in the physical world. This search demonstrates another point of divergence from Jones. While Jones's tactile searching ends in disappointment at finding nothing but a hollow physical world, Roberts's raising of sparks is in a number of ways more uplifting. The poem shows, by way of its involvement with the Metaphysical poetry of Vaughan, and the shared image of the 'sparking flint', the way in which the physical is in fact productive of the metaphysical in Roberts's poetry. To conclude this section, the poem 'Ascension Day' from *Corpus* will be considered as an example of incarnational poetics, which suggests a counterargument to the above, in that without symbolic content, tactile realism in the poem is revealed to be empty of meaning. In this way, Roberts's poetry demonstrates the manner in which his tactile realism is variously generative of, or framed by, Christian symbolism and that, in terms of form, the physical and metaphysical are not simply locked in a static binary, but fluidly inform and challenge each other.

In the context of Roberts's poetry, the use of tactile realism to figure religious symbolism is a response to the widespread loss of the currency of religious signs, or what Heaney terms in an interview with Roberts as 'the big lightening, the

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<sup>17</sup> Alison Milbank, 'Apologetics and the Imagination: Making Strange', in *Imaginative Apologetics: Theology, Philosophy and the Catholic Tradition*, ed. Andrew Davison (London: SCM Press, 2011), pp.31-45 (p. 36).

emptying out'.<sup>18</sup> The phrase 'emptyings out' is coined by Jones in his 'Preface to *The Anathemata*', a work which Roberts frequently references and engages with as a critical influence on his own use of symbols.<sup>19</sup>

In his 'Preface to *The Anathemata*', Jones writes that the role of the artist (which includes the poet) is to hold up 'valid' signs. These signs, writes Jones, 'must be valid for him [the artist] and, normally, for the culture that has made him'. The challenge is that, in order to be meaningful to the contemporaneous reader, signs need contemporary significance, since 'if a requisite now-ness is not present, the sign valid in itself, is apt to suffer a kind of invalidation'.<sup>20</sup> According to Jones, this invalidation of signs is anathema to the arts in general, as 'the arts abhor any loppings off of meanings or emptyings out, any lessening of the totality of connotation, any loss of recession and thickness through'.<sup>21</sup> The two examples Jones uses, and which Roberts repeatedly cites, are the words 'wood' and 'water', and Jones questions the extent to which these words still evoke, for a contemporary readership, the wood of the cross or the rites of baptism. However, Jones also describes the existence of what he terms 'deposits', which everyone within a certain culture accesses, whether they know it or not. In Western culture for instance, Jones feels that, unconsciously, the Canon of Scripture forms part of

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<sup>18</sup> Michael Symmons Roberts, 'Freeing the Waters – Poetry In A Parched Culture', *The Paper*, 7 (2003), para. 3 of 16.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Day, 'In Conversation with Michael Symmons Roberts', *PN Review*, 199 (2011), 52-55 (p. 54); Michael Symmons Roberts, 'The Poet's Tale', in *Redcrosse: Remaking Religious Poetry For Today's World*, ed. by Ewan Fernie (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 93-102 (p.100); Michael Symmons Roberts, 'Contemporary Poetry and Belief', in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Poetry*, ed. by Peter Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 694-706 (p.695); Roberts, 'Poetry's invisible genius' (2002); Roberts, 'Freeing The Waters' (2003).

<sup>20</sup> Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, p. 112.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

the deposits that 'we *all* draw upon, [...] to this degree or that, in however roundabout a way, whether we are lettered or illiterate, Christian or post-Christian, or anti-Christian'.<sup>22</sup>

Jones also asks to what extent it is possible for a sign to be rendered by an artist as if they were aware of certain symbolic connotations, even when they are not. His example is the Roman goddess of flowers: 'without having heard of Flora Dea, there are many who would paint daffodils as though they had invoked her by name'.<sup>23</sup>

This raises the question of whether it is possible for Roberts's readers to touch on a certain meaning as if they had been aware of it, even when they had not.

Additionally, it raises the question of whether it is possible through poetic figuration to convey a sense of symbolic meaning to a reader who is not literate in that symbolic language. While both Jones and Roberts address such potential lacunas through the use of informative footnotes, annotations and post-scripts, it is my contention that Roberts's use of tactile realism demonstrates a supplementation of the specific symbolic content of a sign, with a sense of that same content conveyed through the sign's concretisation. In Roberts's poetry, the example of this *par excellence* is the symbol of the shell.

In everyday language, the shell is a symbol of exteriority, often in a derogatory sense, signifying 'an empty or hollow thing; mere externality without substance' (*OED*). In its active mode though, the verb *shell* also has a capacity for productive

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

ambivalence, meaning both ‘to remove the shell, husk, etc. of’ as well as to ‘to enclose in, or as in, a shell; to encase’ (*OED*). The lexical register of Jones’s own shelling or ‘emptyings out’ is, to an extent, already involved with Roberts’s signature symbol of the shell. Jones’s reference to ‘the whole world of content’, which is contained in certain signs, makes of the sign itself a kind of containing shell.<sup>24</sup> The shell also has numerous cultural symbolic associations, from its role in the origin of lyric poetry (Hermes used a tortoise shell as the body of the first lyre)<sup>25</sup> to being a symbol of baptism. It also marks out the pilgrim’s way known as the Santiago de Compostela, and W. H. Auden identifies William Wordsworth’s use of the shell as a symbol for ‘Poetic Truth’.<sup>26</sup>

In his collections, Roberts makes full use of the range of meanings the symbol of the shell makes available to him, and figures shells out of a number of objects by way of their shell-function. In *Burning Babylon* for instance, one example of this is the ‘hollow school’ and ‘its shells of stores’, which uses the image of the shell to convey a sense of ‘solitude, silence and darkness’ (*BB*, 49) on the buildings of a military base. In the poem ‘Melissa Jones’, the shell-function conferred on a pillbox destabilises the installations’ military tenor when the titular Melissa Jones undermines it with a sense of homeliness:

Once, they found a schoolgirl

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 94.

<sup>26</sup> W. H. Auden, *The Enchafèd Flood: or Romantic Iconography of the Sea* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), p. 44.

in a pillbox hermitage by Guyer's Lock.

Curled inside the concrete snail-shell

—built to quash invasion by canal—

she had brought her own relics:

chocolate, candles, blankets,

a clutch of her mother's Valium

knotted in a yellow duster,

a torn-out book of Genesis. (*BB*, 40)

Melissa Jones's movements 'living from pillbox to pillbox' are in turn provoked by the fear of another, more explosive, sense of the verb *shell* altogether ('a sound | like an aeroplane but very fast and falling. | All here would be melt and white').

What the shell metaphors in *Burning Babylon* demonstrate is the shell-like quality of metaphor or trope itself. Quintilian lists as a specific constellation of metonymy the container standing in for the thing contained (*PEPP*, 876). This is exemplified in Roberts's poetry by the missile shells in *Burning Babylon*, which denote not just the 'ice metal' casing (56), but the nuclear payload they carry. Furthermore, Melissa Jones's movement from shell to shell draws attention to the way 'tropes "transport" words from their normal, familiar habitat', and in the words of César Chesneau Dumarsais, come to occupy a 'borrowed home' (*PEPP*, 1464). The pillbox, a military installation, has installed itself in the borrowed home of the snail-shell. The resulting friction between the homeliness evoked by the snail-shell and the sense of unhoming of the pillbox ('built to quash invasion by canal') is itself a metaphor of



this longstanding idea of the metaphor as shell. As Derrida writes in 'White Mythology', Du Marsais's 'borrowed home' is 'there to signify metaphor itself: it is a metaphor for metaphor'. As a trope in Roberts's writing too, the shell is a metaphor for metaphor, or to use the language of Jones, a sign for the sign.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to the shell's poetic provenance, Roberts exploits the shell's connections to religious motifs, and he draws specifically on the shell's baptismal connotations in the poem 'Last Things'. In this poem, a pair of shell earrings (and ultimately the subject's clothes) represents what needs to be removed in order to allow the subject to be 'open to the water's touch'. The baptism involves contact not only with the physical exterior, but more importantly with the 'greater nakedness' of an interior. Here, Roberts's use of the shell draws on a longstanding, traditional Western metaphysical understanding of the relationship between the physical and the metaphysical aspects that constitute a subject. This is a tradition which has speculated on the body as exterior and the soul as interior as far back as Plato, who posits the body as a prison for the soul in the *Phaedo*.<sup>28</sup> However, the 'greater nakedness' touches as much on notions of emotion and thought, as it does on the spiritual. As such, the device of using tactile language to figure religious symbols — such as when the earrings are likened to 'rare shells turned for centuries | by hands beneath the waves' (C, 64) — is engaged with metaphysical questions extending

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<sup>27</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy', *New Literary History*, 6 (1974), pp.5-74 (p. 55).

<sup>28</sup> Suzanne Nalbantian, *The Symbol of the Soul from Hölderlin to Yeats: A Study in Metonymy* (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1977), p. 1; Stewart Goetz and Charles Taliaferro, *A Brief History of the Soul* (UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), p. 11; Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. by David Gallop (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 33.

beyond the symbol for baptism itself. This makes prior knowledge of the shell's specific symbolic content in relation to baptism unnecessary to experiencing it as a poem which reflects on physical-metaphysical binaries.

This is not to say that Roberts, by concretising symbols in focusing on their tactile qualities, is secularising Christian imagery. It is more that the Christian and the secular dimensions of the poem do not exclude each other, and the poem occupies a space which reveals that such a dichotomy is in fact artificial. In Christianity, the secular ('of or pertaining to the world', *OED*), which is evoked in Roberts's poetry by his tactile realism, is an integral part of faith, not something set in opposition to it. This relationship is fundamental to New Testament conceptions of touch, as exemplified by two key gestures in the Bible: Jesus's prohibition of touch to Mary Magdalen after the resurrection, and the permission to touch, which he grants in turn to his follower Thomas shortly afterwards. The Latin phrase *noli me tangere*, is translated variously as 'do not touch me' or 'do not hold on to me', and is spoken to Mary by Jesus when she calls to him upon recognising him as the resurrected Christ ('Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the father.' John 20. 17). Mary is commanded to tell Jesus's followers what she has seen, but the follower Thomas refuses to believe without concrete evidence and says that unless he 'put[s] my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe' (John 20. 25). When Jesus does appear to Thomas, he instructs his follower to 'reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe' (John 20. 27). In both cases, touch is instrumental to illustrating a certain condition of faith. In the case of Mary, she must not touch, in order for the

physical Jesus to fully assume his transcendent, metaphysical position. In the case of Thomas, physical contact is equated with doubt — a doubt/touch invited by Jesus, despite his eventual reprimand ('Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.' John 20. 29).

Roberts specifically draws on this position of doubt in the long poem 'Hosea Thomas in the Realm of Miracles' (*SK*, 17-23), where he creates a compound of the heavily-tested Old Testament prophet Hosea and the New Testament's Doubting Thomas. Hosea is an Old Testament prophet who is commanded by God to

Go, love a woman who has a lover and is an adulteress, just as the LORD loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love raisin cakes. (Hosea 3. 1)

Hosea's relationship to his disloyal wife mirrors that of God to the people of Israel — including their abandonment and their eventual return. In Roberts's poem, the prophet is similarly misused by his wife Gomer, but rather than mirror God's relationship to his people, Roberts's concentrates on the suffering of a man whose wife has left him ('Whenever his doorbell rang, Hosea prayed | 'Let this be Gomer back.' *SK*, 21). The quality of doubt in this poem ranges from a mistrust in the presence of the metaphysical (which results in the need for Thomas to place his hand in Jesus's wound), to a more general questioning of the divine motives behind human (and Hosea Thomas's personal) suffering. The first mode of doubt is evidenced in Hosea Thomas's need for a powerful physical verification of

metaphysical presences, for instance when 'Hosea had asked for serious weather | as a sign' (*SK*, 17). Although when his call is answered, Hosea appears to demand even more — a sort of angelic hyper-physicality:

Not angels, trawling the roof with thick  
velvet cloaks, howling with friction,  
forced unwilling into time and place.  
Just gales, the hot-rubbing hands  
of opposing plates of air, big as land  
masses, bigger: cuffing the house. (*SK*, 17)

The second mode of doubt (Hosea's rather than Thomas's) is evidenced in Hosea Thomas's questioning stance regarding God's motives:

[...] 'So why', said Hosea  
on such days, 'Why do they have to drag  
their lives like dead pals behind them?  
And why did Gomer give me up to shag  
those others? I know we're all to blame  
but can't you rope in the leeway?' (*SK*, 18)

The questioning tone, echoed in further interrogations such as 'Why make us when you knew full well we'd fall?' (*SK*, 19), continues throughout the poem, as Hosea Thomas wrestles with keeping his faith on the one hand and being 'a fool for God | no more' on the other. In the penultimate section of the poem he asks: 'Why linger at dinner when there's nothing left?' (*SK*, 23). Hosea Thomas's undecidability, the

oscillation between his acceptance of and being at variance with his belief, echoes the position Roberts takes in terms of his own writing process and its relation to his faith:

I can be far more heretical in the poetry than I would be, perhaps in discussion. And I think all poets would say that when your poems are really working they surprise you; they can never be the working out of a preconceived idea.<sup>29</sup>

A degree of hereticism here allows for 'surprise' in Roberts's poetry to occur. This is analogous with Hosea Thomas's own relation to God:

Sometimes Hosea Thomas enjoyed gap  
between himself and God as also  
the gap between his house and the railway.  
True, both were bleak, patchy like bad shaves –  
a few strewn cans and objets de scrap,  
but both gaps gave him space to grow,  
  
think things through, find his own way. (*SK*, 20)

A degree of doubt in Roberts's own work too provides a similar space and distance from which Roberts's is able to approach religious themes in a way that is 'exploratory' rather than having 'a coherent set of theological assumptions that I need to work through in the poems'.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Day, 'In Conversation', p. 53.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

For seventeenth-century Metaphysical poets such as Donne and Herbert, doubt can offer a similar productivity. Chapter 2 will explore for instance the way in which doubt underpins Donne's poetry, and the way in which his poetic corpus as a whole is set against shifts in the geographic understanding of the early modern world, that would lead him to write in 'The First Anniversary' that the 'new philosophy calls all in doubt' (*JD*, 276). In the case of Herbert, as exemplified by the poem 'The Collar', the experience of doubt also becomes something to make a poetic account of:

I struck the board and cried, "No more;  
I will abroad.  
What, shall I ever sigh and pine?  
My lines and life are free, free as the road,  
Loose as the wind, as large as store."<sup>31</sup>

Again, the tone of doubt (in this case with regard to Herbert's calling to the priesthood) is articulated through a series of questions, and the listing of a series of desires at variance with his vocation. C.S. Lewis famously describes the way in which 'much devotional poetry had as its subject not what the poet ought to feel but the fact that he did not feel as he ought'.<sup>32</sup> In Roberts's poetry, the sense of the conditional rendered in Lewis's statement through the word 'ought', becomes another way of maintaining the doubtful distance that allows his poetry to accommodate various, sometimes contradictory constellations of the physical and

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<sup>31</sup> George Herbert, *Poems of George Herbert* (Hoboken, N.J.: Generic NL Freebook Publisher), eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) [accessed 14 July 2015], p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> Cited in Helen Gardner, *Religion and Literature* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 128.

the metaphysical in his poetry, or in the words of Hosea Thomas gives him 'space to grow, | | think things through, find his own way'.

The continuation of a tradition of doubt from the Metaphysical poets onwards can also be identified in later poets. Eliot recognises it for instance in Alfred Tennyson's *In Memoriam* when he writes:

*In Memoriam* can, I think, justly be called a religious poem, but for another reason than that which made it seem religious to his contemporaries. It is not religious because of the quality of its faith, but because of the quality of its doubt. Its faith is a poor thing, but its doubt is a very intense experience.<sup>33</sup>

In the vein of this poetic tradition, Roberts's poetry assumes doubt as a repeated position from which he writes. This 'quality of doubt' is recognisable in his poetry in the use of the conditional to create the necessary 'gap' for his poetry to determine itself, as well as in the 'intense experience' of his engagement with shell-like exteriors. Furthermore, the search for metaphysical meaning in the physical world in Roberts's poetry resonates with Thomas's refusal to believe without placing 'my hand in his side'.

In the poetry of Metaphysical poets such as Vaughan and Donne, physical shells are also the way to the metaphysical, such as when Vaughan experiences 'felt through

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<sup>33</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'In Memoriam' (1936), in T.S. Eliot, *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. by Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 245.

all this fleshly dresse | Bright shootes of everlastingnesse'.<sup>34</sup> The shell as a symbol of exteriority finds itself in their poetry represented not only in seashells, but also clothes and prison cells. Vaughan describes 'Dust and clay' as 'Mans antient wear!'<sup>35</sup> and the body as 'my Cell | of Clay'.<sup>36</sup> In each case, the material functions as a correlative to a metaphysical component, whether this is 'Bright shootes of everlastingnesse' or the soul. For Vaughan, a preferred symbol of the shell's metaphysical correlative are sparks, and Roberts's entire collection *Raising Sparks* is backlit by the dualism established in the title of Vaughan's own collection *Silex Scintillans* — The Sparking Flint. This dualism (the physical flint and the metaphysical spark) is reflected stylistically in Roberts's use of tactile language to figure symbolic content in poems such as 'Smithereens'. However, the poem 'Smithereens' also shows how Roberts's tactile realism can touch on a poem's sense of the religious, without a specific symbolic structure to support it.

'Smithereens' is the central poem of the collection *Raising Sparks*, and it is typical of Roberts's core theme of the relationship between the physical and the metaphysical. Roberts constructs the provenance of this theme as rooted in Metaphysical poetry, through an epigraph by Vaughan, which compounds the book's leitmotif of 'raising sparks' by way of Vaughan's luminary paradox that 'There is in God (some say) | A deep, but dazzling darkness'.<sup>37</sup> The 'raising sparks'

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<sup>34</sup> Henry Vaughan, *Henry Vaughan: Selected Poems*, ed. Anne Cluysennar, (London: SPCK, 2004), p. 71.

<sup>35</sup> Vaughan, p. 129. A similar use for of clothes can be found in Donne here: *JD* p. 137 (ll. 77-78), p. 289 (l. 162), p. 313 (l. 13), p. 330 (ll. 27-28).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>37</sup> Vaughan, p. 154.



leitmotif demonstrates the application of Roberts's tactile realism within a symbolic framework, as the metaphysical sparks are only ever raised by way of a physical container, and the symbolic framework is specific to a Hasidic Jewish creation story, which Roberts includes as a note in the book. It is worth quoting here in full:

'Smithereens' is based around a Hasidic Jewish story of creation and redemption, which came to my notice in a work called *The Light of The Eyes*, by Rabbi Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl (1730-97).

The story depicts God holding back his power and light to make space to create something other than himself, an act of self-limiting or withdrawal called *Zimzum*. Then into that space God shines his light of creation, but that light is so intense that it [sic] smashes the clay vessels intended to capture it — a cataclysm known as *Shevira*.

This cataclysm results in fragments of divine light — sparks — being scattered across the world, landing in accessible and inaccessible places. Sometimes these sparks are concealed by shards of the clay vessels.

The purpose of life then becomes a redemptive one, to find and raise the spark, and make the divine light complete again. According to Hasidic teaching, these sparks may lie in trivial encounters or major challenges. They are as likely to be found in the eyes of strangers as those of your own children.

This creation and redemption story has a dark twin in the chilling parallels — broken vessels, shattered light falling — between Chernobyl's Hasidic tradition and its twentieth century infamy.' (*RS*, 68)

In the use of notes such as this, Roberts demonstrates a mindfulness towards his readership, which is resonant of Jones. Jones felt that while something may be obvious to one reader, it is no longer possible to assume that 'the terms of reference were common to all' and as such includes footnotes to provide symbolic

context for his poetry.<sup>38</sup> In *Raising Sparks*, however, even though the shell and the spark are symbolic of the allegory recorded by Roberts as a note, at the same time the tropes touch on a much wider theme of physical-metaphysical binarism and exceed the limited frame of the story. The metaphysical reference does not necessarily structure the tactile-realist imagery. Rather, the physical search for divine correlatives demonstrates how tactile realism generates metaphysical content.

*Raising Sparks* is scattered through with references to bone china vessels (33), shells (30, 33), shellfish (9, 41), husks (2, 25, 36), oysters (27, 28), carapace and claws (49). These references to shells however are not limited to the symbolic framework of the poem 'Smithereens' alone. Several 'sparks' appear in other poems such as the Vaughanian poem 'Scintilla' (RS, 12) or the symbolically Christian 'The Advent House' (RS, 4), neither of which bear directly on the Hasidic Jewish myth. Furthermore, in a poem such as 'Divers' (RS, 49), in which 'carapace and claws' are 'rebuilt' in order 'to tempt the crab-souls out again', the spark has been interchanged with the word 'soul', yet the realist-symbolist tension, in which something physical reconstructed by hand attempts to invoke something metaphysical, remains the same.

In Arthur Green's introduction to Rabbi Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl's *The Light of Their Eyes*, the search for the shells that contain the sparks takes place in a tactile register. 'Because God is gracious and wants the work of redemption to proceed',

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<sup>38</sup> Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, p. 111.

writes Green, 'He [...] will bring to your hands those objects in which are contained the particular bits of divinity that are yours to uncover'.<sup>39</sup> This tactile register is borne out in the poem 'Smithereens', when the first container is found, and the speaker feels 'the sharp-in-soft contact of my boot | with a shell miles from the sea' (33). This tactility recurs as other vessels and sparks are brought to hand ('someone shakes a blanket and finds') and manually raised: 'lifts it gently like a nest of bees', 'to raise a fist of sparks at once, | breaking in the sky and opening eyes' (34).

The action of physically breaking the shell is a further defining feature of Roberts's tactile realism, and frequently the breaking of the shell is coupled with a powerful sense of metaphysical productivity. In 'Smithereens', the final spark is only found in its shell 'when her knife cut a name in a manna ash', and the shell (a tree) is no longer intact, a word derived 'from in (not) and tactus (touched)'.<sup>40</sup> In the collection *Soft Keys*, a similar value is placed on the breaking of the shell in a description of Weil's mind as 'a mite | of plaster that can burst a great clay vessel | in the kiln' (*SK*, 23). Here the shell is not only a symbol of exteriority, but contains a double-interiority, that which it encloses, and also a thickness or width in the shell-wall. It is in this second interiority that the 'speck' is aligned with the spark. The breaking of both shells is associated with a productive release of the metaphysical correlative, whether this is in the form of a spark, or as in another poem, poetry itself: 'when shell cracks and a song begins' (*DS*, 8). The idea of the shell as being productive of

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<sup>39</sup> Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl, *Upright Practices, The Light of their Eyes*, trans. by Arthur Green (New York & Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1982), p. 16.

<sup>40</sup> Carla Mazzio, 'The Senses Divided: Organs, Objects, and Media in Early Modern England' (2003), in *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Cultural Reader*, ed. by David Howes (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2005), p. 94.

song is further echoed in the poem 'The Hookses' in *Soft Keys*, where 'The sun will nuzzle like a pet | at her ankles, and in that twilight | shells will sing the vespers of love.' (SK, 53)

If the tactile-realist act of shelling, in the sense of removing or breaking the shell, is productive of symbolic sparks, then so too is the second sense of shell, 'to enclose in, or as in, a shell'. In *Raising Sparks*, this is evident in the way that the action of shelling is used to raise a spark, the hands themselves serving as the container: 'I cupped the precious relic | in my palms then held it high above my head' (RS, 34). In other poems, such as 'The Advent House', sparks are also brought to life through the manual action of shelling, when speakers 'breathe | on one strong spark, cosset it | with paper fists and kindling' (RS, 4).

*Raising Sparks's* leitmotif, in both the poem 'Smithereens' and the other examples, is a search within the speakers' tactile reality for aspects of the divine. This search for the untouchable in the touchable is underscored by a line of Jones's poetry, which serves as one of *Raising Sparks's* epigraphs:

I have watched the wheels go round in case I might see the living creatures like the  
appearance of lamps, in case I might see the Living God projected from the Machine.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> David Jones, *Introducing David Jones: A Selection of his Writing*, ed. by John Matthias (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 31.

The speaker's search for God in Jones's poem 'A, a, a Dominus Deum' is also conducted by hand and features a contiguous sense of the vessel ('I have felt for His Wounds | in nozzles and containers.'). However, while Jones's poem is marked by the disappointment in turning up the shell alone without its divine correlative ('my hands found the glazed work unrefined and the terrible crystal a stage-paste'), then the action of finding and raising sparks in Roberts's poetry is figuratively and directionally more uplifting.

This mirrors the difference in the two poets' critical writings on symbols. While Kathleen Raine identifies Jones's position on what he terms 'emptyings out' as 'an affirmation of the enduring value of that which is about to be lost',<sup>42</sup> Roberts sees this loss as an 'opportunity [...] to find new terms, new metaphors'.<sup>43</sup> There is also a sense in which rather than identify new metaphors, Roberts's tactile-realist figurations demonstrate, independently of the religious sense of their particular symbols, a broader sense of the religious. Alison Milbank provides a useful framework by which to understand this sense of the religious, and how it is that Roberts's tactile realism makes religious experience available to a readership not literate in the symbolism his poetry draws on. To underscore the connection to the action of *Raising Sparks*, and the way the physical in Roberts's poetry is generative of the metaphysical, it is worth in particular noting Milbank's description of the sacraments 'in which it is truly matter that takes us "up"'.<sup>44</sup> Milbank derives her upward, raising motion from Luigi Giussani's description of reality. Giussani writes

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<sup>42</sup> Kathleen Raine, 'The Sign-Making of David Jones, *The Iowa Review*, 6 (1975), 96-101 (p. 97).

<sup>43</sup> Roberts, 'Poetry in a Post-Secular Age', p. 71.

<sup>44</sup> Milbank, p. 42.

that when one comes into contact with reality, it calls you 'beyond itself, further up'.<sup>45</sup> In Milbank's theological reading of realism in art and fiction, this upward motion becomes an invitation 'up into a world beyond the text'.<sup>46</sup> The upward movement, which indicates something beyond itself finds its echo in Roberts's use of Weilean 'metaxu', which will be discussed in Chapter 3. It is the same dynamic motion evidenced in *Raising Sparks*, which moves from the physical to what is beyond the physical. The baptismal poem 'Last Things', in which the shell is removed to allow a metaphysical interior (which exceeds the shell in value) to be touched, similarly echoes Milbank's reading of baptism as an event which affirms that a baptised person 'means more than she seems'.<sup>47</sup>

In 'Apologetics and the Imagination', Milbank echoes Roberts's call for 'new metaphors' in an age where traditional symbols have lost their currency, when she writes of the new language that is needed to engage those people 'lost to the meaning of our faith'. Rather than construct 'new metaphors' like Roberts does, Milbank wants to show people that 'they are already engaged in religious practice' through their everyday language.<sup>48</sup> She gives by way of example a sermon she delivered about a local ironmonger's shop, in which she discussed 'in depth the solidity of tools, the smells of the wood-yard, the vast range of possible screws and fastenings'. This language of the material (including the tactile realism of 'the solidity of tools'), writes Milbank, 'provoked a strong, positive response from the

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<sup>45</sup> Giussani cited by Milbank, p. 41.

<sup>46</sup> Milbank, p. 41.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

men listening, both believers and non-believers'. Milbank writes that through the language she used, which echoes Roberts's tactile language, her listeners 'were enabled to reflect metaphysically upon the reality of their own experience'.<sup>49</sup>

This structure, whereby attention to the particulars of the physical provokes metaphysical reflection, is based on the belief that whether they realise it or not, everyone makes 'their own assumption of a religious depth to experience'.<sup>50</sup>

According to Milbank, it is the tactile realism of Roberts's poetry that makes the reader come into contact with that 'religious depth'. In the case of 'Smithereens', the raising of the metaphysical spark is prompted by the very real 'sharp-in-soft contact of my boot | with a shell miles from the sea'. This leads to an 'opening of the religious sense', which as Milbank suggests is already there: 'How to raise it came by instinct' (*RS*, 34).<sup>51</sup> The result of the 'raising' seems minimal, and 'When hands dropped, the sky had lightened | by a fraction'. The importance of what has occurred is not in the physical change, but in the shift of awareness from physical to metaphysical.

Rather than convey an unfamiliar symbolic message, Roberts's poetry appeals to something that is already there. On the subject of Caspar David Friedrich's *Chalk Cliffs at Rügen* (1818), Milbank writes:

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

We do not need crosses or religious iconography to experience this as a religious painting because it gives us a religious sense of the mystery of the real.<sup>52</sup>

To paraphrase Milbank, Roberts's reader similarly does not need crosses or religious iconography to experience his poetry as religious, because it already gives them 'a religious sense of the mystery of the real'. In this way, in a poem such as 'Smithereens', tactile realism allows for specific symbolic content (the story of creation) to be given up entirely, while still maintaining the poem's sense of the religious. Unlike Jones who places his footnotes within the actual text of the poem, the creation story is included in Roberts's collection as an unreferenced, incidental note at the back of the book, where it will not interrupt the experience of reading the poem for the first time.

However, other poems, such as 'Ascension Day' in the collection *Corpus*, suggest the opposite is true, and that rather than open on to the religious, the physical is in fact contained by symbolic, religious structures. Roberts points out that the poem 'Ascension Day' is part of a tradition of symbolic concretisations including Saunders Lewis's 'Ascension Thursday', which 'describes the natural world on Ascension Day (in May) playing out the ascension on the hills outside a South Wales council estate'.<sup>53</sup> Lewis's realism and concretisation, echoing the modernist mantra 'no ideas but in things', is in fact, as far as Roberts is concerned, inherently theological, as 'in Christian theological terms, the "concrete" is also the "incarnational", and as

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>53</sup> Roberts, 'Poetry in a Post-Secular Age', p. 74.



such a proper place to engage with ultimate values'.<sup>54</sup> However, the incarnational poetics of Roberts's own poem suggest that poetic realism without an accompanying symbolism, rather than dynamically taking the reader *up*, finds the process of signification arrested. While 'Ascension Day' is to an extent a good example of Roberts's incarnational poetics, it also suggests that without symbolic content and context, tactile realism on its own is liable to stall.

In Roberts's poem, a degree of tactile friction is generated between the gospellary title 'Ascension Day', and by the Old Testament prohibition made by Leviticus against touching shellfish ('whoever touches the carcass of any of them shall be unclean', 11. 24). The latter is evoked by the poem's setting in the *Blue Lobster Café*. The symbolic value of 'Ascension Day' is embodied in the poem by the figure of the head chef of the *Blue Lobster Café*, who 'arms outstretched — | bears what looks like a body, | | but conjures six cook's shirts, | hot-laundered, pegged out | dripping in a drench of sun' (C, 2). The thermal register ('hot-laundered') lends the poem a specifically tactile realism, but in the third stanza, the poem's physicality begins to open up to the metaphysical, and as the shirts 'dry, their half-hearted | semaphore becomes | more urgent, untranslatable'. This sense of the 'untranslatable' marks the point at which the metaphysical makes itself felt through the physical, Milbank's 'religious sense of the mystery of the real' or perhaps more accurately 'the immanence of the real'.<sup>55</sup> The poem ends with a list of the shells left behind on Ascension Day: 'crab-backs, prawn skins, clams, | black-violet mussel

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>55</sup> Milbank, p. 42.

shells', so that even the shirts from the beginning of the poem and the body are reconfigured as abandoned shells. This figuration is repeated in a later poem in *Corpus*, in which the speaker states: 'If I believed the soul | was separate from the body, | I might describe myself | | as the soul of my clothes' (C, 42).

While the body-as-shell seems inextricably bound up with its soulful contents (a tactile-realist figuration with a sense of the religious), there is also a sense in 'Ascension Day' of the shell attempting to assert an agency of its own. The soul-less human bodies, represented by the shirts, continue to signify (albeit in a 'half-hearted | semaphore [...] urgent, untranslatable'), even when their metaphysical correlative has ascended and left them (symbolised in the evaporation of water). The idea of the shell's language being 'half-hearted' suggests that the empty shell, lacking its symbolic content, cannot make complete sense to a potential readership or even to itself. This sense of arrested signification is mirrored by a figurative stagnation as the 'crab-backs, prawn skins, clams, | black-violet mussel shells, | all reek in sun-baked bin-sacks'. In this sense, the empty shell can finally be understood as a symbol of Jones's own emptied-out sign. Through Roberts's symbol of the empty shell, Jones's 'lament' for 'the passing of a rich and important set of signs and symbols'<sup>56</sup> has become part of the very 'deposit' or *materia poetica* which Roberts's poetry draws on to inform its symbolic discourse.<sup>57</sup> This suggests that while Roberts's tactile realism allows for a certain sense of the religious to be conveyed to a readership that is not literate in a specific symbolic discourse, other

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<sup>56</sup> Roberts, 'The Poet's Tale', p. 100.

<sup>57</sup> Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, p. 115.

aspects of the poem are only available to those who are familiar with the symbolic framework within which his incarnational poetics occur.

Roberts's poetry has demonstrated that it is never strictly speaking incarnational. Instead, symbolic discourse and tactile realism have been shown to variously contextualise each other. The signature of Roberts's poetry is the movement between these positions, the constant interplay and renegotiation between the ways in which the physical and metaphysical bear on each other. The shell, rather than being a static symbol of exteriority, becomes a symbol of movements. These are the upward movements, which indicate towards something beyond the physical; the movement inherent in the shell's function as a metaphor for metaphor; and the movement between different constellations of physical and metaphysical, which allow Roberts's poetry to play with the various philosophical, theological and poetic discourses his poetry engages with. This sense of movement will evidence itself further in the next two sections, as Roberts stages it in two further constellations: machine and ghost, and body and soul.

### **Machine and Ghost: Negotiating Cartesian Dualism in *Drysalter* (2013)**

The expression 'ghost in the machine' marks a specific engagement with a longstanding Cartesian and post-Cartesian discourse on the relationship between the physical and the metaphysical. Roberts's poetry contributes its own extension to this discourse in the form of the 'ghost of a ghost-| in-the-machine' (RS, 16), and in a series of poems featuring ghost-machine constellations. Roberts's poems

attempt to negotiate their way out of the deadlock of traditional Cartesian mind-body dualism, through a series of reversals figured in the language of touch in which the machine finds itself inside the ghost, or the ghost in the machine is in fact another kind of machine — the human body. While being engaged in a tradition beginning with Descartes and galvanised by the philosopher Gilbert Ryle in the early twentieth century, Roberts's engagement with Cartesianism results in a series of human-machine hybrids, which resonate in particular with Haraway's notion of the cyborg. Part of millennial cultural contemplation, the poetic configurations of bodies as ghosts in machines becomes a question of identity in a post-industrial world, resounding with Haraway's sense that in 'our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs'.<sup>58</sup>

In what follows, I will begin by historically contextualising Gilbert Ryle's phrase the ghost in the machine. I will argue that Roberts's use of the phrase in his poetry and his expansion of the term into the 'ghost of a ghost-| in-the-machine', challenges Ryle's intention in creating the phrase as an attempt to drive 'the final nail in the coffin of Cartesian dualism'.<sup>59</sup> I will demonstrate the way the range of ghost-machine constellations from the collection *Drysalter* both stage traditional Cartesian configurations of ghost and machine and challenge the same constellations through a series of reversals. It is in the movement between these

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<sup>58</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), p. 150.

<sup>59</sup> Julia Tanney, 'Rethinking Ryle: A Critical Discussion of The Concept of Mind', in *The Concept of Mind* (UK: Routledge, 2009), p.ix-lvii (p. ix).

different positions, in which physical and metaphysical are variously integrated or separated, that Roberts's poetry comes to reflect the range of paradoxical experiences which constitute what it is to be a subject that consists of both physical and metaphysical components, of bodily and mental faculties.

In the 'Sixth Meditation', Descartes considers 'the body of a man as a kind of machine':

Yet a clock constructed with wheels and weights observes all the laws of its nature just as closely when it is badly made and tells the wrong time as when it completely fulfils the wishes of the clockmaker. In the same way, I might consider the body of a man as a kind of machine equipped with and made up of bones, nerves, muscles, veins, blood and skin in such a way that, even if there were no mind in it, it would still perform all the same movements as it now does in those cases where movement is not under the control of the will or, consequently, of the mind.<sup>60</sup>

Descartes's machine is capable of two kinds of movement: (1) movement that is under the control of the mind, and (2) movement that 'occurs merely as a result of the disposition of the organs'.<sup>61</sup> Among other philosophical problems, Descartes's consideration is often thought to have generated or come to epitomise what is famously known as the mind-body problem. Although expressed in a language which suggests a single issue, this longstanding philosophical dilemma encompasses a range of questions from the way in which the mind could possibly act upon the

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<sup>60</sup> René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies*, trans. by John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 58.

<sup>61</sup> Descartes, p. 58.

body to where the mind is located in relation to the body. It also raises the question of how it is possible to know another mind exists, if a body is capable of moving without depending on a mind in the first place (also known as the problem of other minds).<sup>62</sup> The Ghost in the Machine, which Ryle capitalises, or to give it its full title 'the dogma of the Ghost in the Machine', is an expression he coins to describe the mechanics by which Descartes seems to envision the relationship between mind and body.<sup>63</sup> It is a reference loaded with 'deliberate abusiveness', which wants to point out to the reader the way in which Descartes's configuration is haunted by the fact that, in Ryle's opinion, 'it is one big mistake and a mistake of a special kind. It is, namely, a category-mistake'.<sup>64</sup> Ryle feels his abusiveness is necessary, because he identifies 'Descartes's Myth' as constituting 'the official doctrine' among philosophers of his time, and as such it demands an aggressive counter-assertion to match the full weight of its authority.

Ryle's vilification of Descartes finds itself echoed in contemporary critical writings on touch. In his essay 'Handling Children: To Touch or Not to Touch?' for instance, Anthony Synnott specifically links the shadow of Cartesianism to notions of the machine, when he identifies the Cartesian legacy as being responsible for contemporary childrearing practices. Synnott writes that since 'Descartes, along with many subsequent philosophers, had argued that the body is a machine', this results in 'a number of nineteenth-century physicians determined to put this theory into practice by advocating that children be raised with mechanical precision'. This

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<sup>62</sup> Tanney, p. xvi.

<sup>63</sup> Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (UK: Routledge, 2009), p. 5.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

leads, in turn, to children being 'disembodied from their own bodies, literally as well as metaphorically'.<sup>65</sup> In the abusive term 'Ghost in the Machine', Ryle identifies in the Cartesian language of interiority (ghost-mind) and exteriority (machine-body) the beginnings of the path of obfuscation in philosophical discussion, which Synnott draws attention to. While the language of exteriority and interiority are meant to be used metaphorically ('since minds, not being in space, could not be described as being spatially inside anything else'), Ryle feels that too many thinkers are nevertheless 'found speculating how stimuli, the physical sources of which are yards or miles outside a person's skin, can generate mental responses inside his skull'.<sup>66</sup>

According to Ryle, this discrepancy, a category mistake, results from the fact that as a result of the official doctrine rooted in Cartesian dualism, mind and body are treated separately. Ryle does not dismiss the importance of mental activity altogether, and as Julia Tanney points out, he is careful to acknowledge internal, private processes to which others do not have access, writing that 'much of our ordinary thinking is conducted in internal monologue or silent soliloquy'.<sup>67</sup> To ignore these processes would in a sense be to endorse mind-body dualism by simply pretending part of it does not exist, rather than identifying its category error. It is more that Ryle does not recognise these internal processes as consistently acting on the physical body in a way that in turn causes the body to act. In Ryle's

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<sup>65</sup> Anthony Synnott, 'Handling Children: To Touch or Not to Touch?', in *The Book of Touch*, ed. by Constance Classen (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2005), pp.41-47 (pp. 42-43).

<sup>66</sup> Ryle, p. 2.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

definition, mental process and physical action are part of the same category, and it is in this way that the notion of a distinct Cartesian mind is identified as a category mistake.

The legacy of Ryle's 'Ghost in the Machine' is widely understood in terms of the contribution it makes to establishing philosophical behaviourism. The expression is taken from its original context some years later by Arthur Koestler, when he publishes his study of human self-destructive tendencies *The Ghost in the Machine* in 1967.<sup>68</sup> Koestler acknowledges the contextual note of rebuke towards Descartes in Ryle's expression, but talks with a similar level of abusiveness of the Oxford behaviourists themselves (to which he sees Ryle as belonging), and compares them to 'flat-earthers'. Koestler appropriates the ghost in the machine, decapitalising the expression, and seeks to position it somewhere between the behaviourists and 'crass Cartesian dualism'<sup>69</sup> as he is concerned that

By the very act of denying the existence of the ghost in the machine — of mind dependent on, but also responsible for, the actions of the body — we incur the risk of turning it into a very nasty, malevolent ghost.<sup>70</sup>

Koestler's own notion of the ghost in the machine is used principally to illustrate why human beings possess self-destructive tendencies. Koestler's ghost is the result of the mind being haunted by violent drives once necessary for survival, which

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<sup>68</sup> Tanney, p. ix.

<sup>69</sup> Arthur Koestler, *The Ghost in the Machine* (London: Arkana, 1967), p. 204.

<sup>70</sup> Koestler, p. 202.



humankind has otherwise situationally evolved away from. The now ubiquitous expression 'ghost in the machine', while having its provenance in both Koestler's and Ryle's uses of the term, is broadly associated with a kind of Cartesian mechanism, although it is largely independent of Ryle's abusive tone and has lost most of its judgmental inflection.

In an editorial to an issue of *Poetry Review* titled 'The Ghost in the Machine', Fiona Sampson, summarising the Rylean position, writes that:

Of course, we're all anti-Cartesian now. Gilbert Ryle's pejorative phrase, 'the ghost in the machine' tells us just what we're supposed to think of Descartes's mind-body distinction. We live in a material world, and so – like the second Madonna, not the first – we too must be material. Even thinking itself, we know now, is a material event in the bodily brain.<sup>71</sup>

However, as Sampson continues to write, the sense that Ryle somehow completely draws a line under Cartesianism is false. Particularly in its broader sense, the move towards materialism from a religious perspective, which is reflected in Ryle's refutation of Descartes (in whose *Meditations* the existence of God is a central point of reflection), also proves to have been overestimated. At least Roberts argues as much when he writes that:

the debate should be over. The enlightenment project was meant to see off religion by now, but instead, many sociologists argue that it is secularism that's in retreat.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Fiona Sampson, 'Editorial', *Poetry Review*, 98 (2008), 123 (p. 123).

<sup>72</sup> Roberts, 'Poetry in a Post-Secular Age', p. 69.

Roberts's statement demonstrates that beyond the struggle between Descartes and Ryle, the phrase 'the ghost in the machine' also marks a meeting point between religious and scientific perspectives, in which the metaphysical or spiritual position of one wrestles with the physical or materialist position of the other. This problematic is reflected in poems such as 'Mapping the Genome (I)', in which the 'ghost of a ghost- | in-the-machine' is offset by the notion of an integrated 'bodily soul' (*RS*, 16). This poem more than any appears to demonstrate the way in which, in Roberts's poetry, scientific and religious positions do not conflict, but that in his own words:

they are parallel tracks for trying to explain what we're here for. They are both after ultimate meaning and they proceed by different methods without there being an opposition.<sup>73</sup>

Both religion and science, Roberts claims, are 'constantly shifting and contested', so that neither offers solid ground from which to criticise the other.<sup>74</sup> In 'Mapping the Genome (I)' titular genetic knowledge is instead supplemented in the body of the poem by the 'desire to know, to map you to your | bodily soul'. In the 'bodily soul', the metaphysical and the physical are combined, and an alternative way of knowing establishes 'a new epistemology of touch'. This 'epistemology' consists of 1) the immediate 'sensation' of someone, 2) the resulting 'memory', and also 3) the experience of the memory fading. This makes it both a physical ('sensation') and a

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<sup>73</sup> Day, 'In Conversation', p. 53.

<sup>74</sup> Roberts, 'Poetry in a Post-Secular Age', p. 73.

metaphysical ('memory') form of knowledge, but like both science and religion, which are 'constantly shifting', the 'new epistemology' is subject to being constantly re-established ('Then I wanted to know you again'). The way in which this knowledge is linked to the speech act ('With the soft consonant of wet lips, | we began a new epistemology of touch') in turn reflects back on the poem itself. The poem (like the new epistemology) finds itself positioned between the physical or scientific ('Mapping the Genome (I)') and the metaphysical or religious ('bodily soul'). In this way, science and religion do not run on parallel tracks in Roberts's poetry at all, since the poem becomes a site of their making contact. This, in turn, echoes the way ghost and machine come to inform each other in the poems in *Drysalter*, and while in a sense they proceed separately, they also touch on each other to a high degree.

Contemporary developments of Ryle and Koestler, in which the ghost in the machine appears, can be seen in the writings of Derrida and of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari — even if the ghost in the machine is no longer always named as such. The treatment of the ghost in the machine in these writings echoes many of the patterns evidenced in Roberts's poetry, especially in the way in which ghost and machine are made to interact or touch. In *Spectres of Marx* for instance, Derrida plays on the tensions between the physical shell and metaphysical contents, which are emblematic of the ghost in the machine, through his discussion of the ghost of Hamlet's father. Derrida draws attention to the ambiguity which Hamlet's father's ghost presents: Hamlet's father is dead/departed, yet he/it appears to be present. (To be precise, what appears is the old king of Denmark's armour. Its contents are

implied but not directly visible.) A paradox results from the fact that 'There is something disappeared, departed in the apparition itself as reappearance of the departed',<sup>75</sup> and Derrida discusses the spectre in terms of its being 'always a *revenant*' — it '*begins by coming back*'.<sup>76</sup> The repetitious nature of the spectre is characterised by the way in which its 'first' appearance is actually not a real 'first', since it is necessarily a return from the dead. A ghost has always been here before. However, the apparition has never appeared in this exact form, so that its appearance as well as being a return is also a first time. 'Repetition *and* first time', writes Derrida, 'this is perhaps the question of the event as question of the ghost'.<sup>77</sup> This ghostly recurrence is what Derrida comes to term a *hauntology*, which in French is a homophonic play on the word ontology — a homophony echoing Roberts's own experiments in homonymic titling. The *hauntology* and its ambivalent positioning of ghost and *being* together, suggests that the question of the *revenant* is not simply a question of ghosts alone, but engaged with broader metaphysical questions. In short, it is not simply the ghost alone that is marked by a constant sense of repetitiousness and first times, but this is also to some degree how the subject is constituted.

The sense that *Spectres of Marx* can be read as an interrogation of the subject, and the Cartesian subject of the ghost in the machine in particular, is emphasized by the way in which Derrida is careful to differentiate between the *spirit* and the *spectre* as

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<sup>75</sup> Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: the State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf, Routledge Classics (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), p. 5.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

'the spirit, the spectre are not the same thing'.<sup>78</sup> In terms of the ghost and the machine the spectre come closest to representing the unit as a whole, and the *spirit* the ghost on its own. Derrida writes that:

the spectre is a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit. It becomes, rather, some "thing" that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other. For it is flesh and phenomenality that give to the spirit its spectral apparition, but which disappear right away in the apparition, in the very coming of the *revenant* or the return of the spectre.<sup>79</sup>

The spectre is a composite of the spirit or ghost and the flesh or machine, resulting in (most appropriately for this investigation) 'the tangible intangibility of a proper body without flesh'.<sup>80</sup> Their interaction is one of co-substantiation, as well as a mutual undermining in which the corporeality of the spectre is made to 'disappear right away in the apparition' but the spirit depends on the tangible flesh-machine to give it 'its spectral apparition'. The binaries set up by Descartes, in which one acts upon the other and the mind is simply installed inside a body, are here remarkable for the way they inhabit each other. As Peter Buse and Andrew Stott observe, the paradoxical nature of ghosts lends itself particularly well to Derrida's project of deconstruction as a whole:

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

Ghosts are neither dead nor alive, neither corporeal objects nor stern absences. As such, they are the stock-in-trade of the Derridean enterprise, standing in defiance of binary oppositions such as presence and absence, body and spirit, past and present, life and death. For deconstruction, these terms cannot stand in clear, independent opposition to one another, as each can be shown to possess an element or trace of the term that it is meant to oppose.<sup>81</sup>

In light of the constellation of the spectre, to this list of binaries can be added the ghost and the machine. It is in this regard that the Derridean and the Robertsonian projects most closely appear to overlap. In its challenge to Cartesian dualism and Rylean materialism, Roberts's repeated images of cyborgian apparitions trace precisely the machine-like quality of the ghost and the ghostliness of the machine. Furthermore, this thesis will demonstrate that it is precisely the movement from one repetition to another that produces the lyric subject in Roberts's poetry.

A second contemporary development of the ghost in the machine can be recognised in the work of Deleuze and Guattari. If the initial emphasis in Derrida's work falls on the notion of the ghost, then Deleuze and Guattari are better known for their work on the machine:

Everywhere *it* is machines — real ones, not figurative ones: machines driving other machines, machines being driven by other machines, with all the necessary couplings and connections. An organ-machine is plugged into an energy-source-machine: the one

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<sup>81</sup> *Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History*, ed. By Peter Buse and Andrew Stott (London: Macmillian Press Lt, 1999), p. 10.

produces a flow that the other interrupts. The breast is a machine that produces milk, and the mouth a machine coupled to it. The mouth of the anorexic wavers between several functions: its possessor is uncertain as to whether it is an eating-machine, an anal-machine, a talking machine, or a breathing-machine (asthma attacks). Hence we are all handymen: each with his little machines. For every organ-machine, an energy-machine: all the time, flows and interruptions.<sup>82</sup>

Deleuze and Guattaris' proposition that 'every machine is a machine of a machine' seems figured explicitly in the idea of the conveyor belt productions of cars by robot arms set out in *Drysalter* (see below). At first, it is difficult to recognise where there is room for the ghost in the Deleuzian conception of the machine to fit in.<sup>83</sup> To a certain extent, this is because in the Deleuzian conception there is no longer a ghost as such, or at least the ghost has now become another kind of machine 'coupled' to another machine which in turn consist of series of other smaller machines. However, rather than eliminate binarism, the Deleuzian machine expands it. 'Desiring-machines are binary machines', write Deleuze and Guattari, 'obeying a binary law or set of rules governing associations: one machine is always coupled with another. The productive synthesis, the production of production, is inherently connective in nature'.<sup>84</sup> This emphasis, which comes to echo Roberts's poetry, is not on the points in the binary (the machine itself), not even in what is produced, but in the 'production of production'. The ghost in the machine in

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<sup>82</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 1.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

Deleuze and Guattari is at best a ghost and a machine, linked to further machines, producing

continuous, infinite flux: for example, the anus-machine and the intestine-machine, the intestine-machine and the stomach-machine, the stomach-machine and the mouth-machine, the mouth-machine and the flow of milk of a herd of dairy cattle ("and then... and then...").<sup>85</sup>

Each machine continues and interrupts the flow, in a manner which is also identifiable in the repeated and connected constellations of Roberts's poetry. The emphasis on repetition and movement developed by both Derrida and by Deleuze and Guattari, and the emphasis on the productive capacity of the binary (as opposed to the idea of a static deadlock) is what is also at stake in Roberts's work.

In Roberts's poetry, the ghost in the machine appears in its simplest form in the last line of the poem 'Room 260' when 'Once, for just an hour, a bee broke in | between the floorboards, and became | (circling in vain for jasmine, clover) | the ghost in the machine' (*HH*, 37). In the context of the poem, which sets up the room as an undisturbed and inanimate shell, the bee comes to represent a kind of life spark within it. The way the room is portrayed, 'locked from inside' and 'ever dark' plays out the idea of the machine's interiority as being accessible only to itself. The bee, which in this case represents the ghost, enters the machine from the outside.

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 39.



The result of this conception of the ghost in the machine is that by being independent of the machine, and arriving from outside it, the ghost necessarily feels out of place once it is inside, 'circling in vain for jasmine, clover'. Other registers inherent in the symbol of the bee confirm the sense of its representing the ghost, as Michelis writes, in 'the context of Christian religion, bees can symbolize the immortality of the soul'.<sup>86</sup> However, Michelis also points out that in the sense of its 'honey and sting',<sup>87</sup> the bee enjoys a certain doubleness. The bee in 'Room 260' does this too, since as much as it represents the incorporeal ghost in the machine, a degree of corporeality is conferred on it through its searching for food.

The use of flowers connects 'Room 260' with a poem in the collection *Raising Sparks*, in which Descartes is found in a room in which 'The garden is cut and strung up; | Chinese Lanterns, Lavender, Honesty, | hang from the beams like carcasses'. (RS, 7) The 'carcasses' are another way of imagining the body-machine without an animating ghost, although according to Descartes's own consideration, the mind is not needed to animate the body at all, since it is capable of movement which 'occurs merely as a result of the disposition of the organs' (see above). In fact, the ghost-machine configuration staged in Roberts's poetry is never completely true to this Cartesian reflection. When, for instance, Roberts writes that 'All beliefs cast out, Descartes | turns his head above the fire to warm | his ghost' (RS, 7), the

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<sup>86</sup> Angelica Michelis, "'Where Bees Pray on Their Knees: Spiritual and religious Symbolism in Carol Ann Duffy's *The Bees*", *Symbolism*, 12/13 (2013), 336-351 (p. 344).

<sup>87</sup> Ferber (p. 23) cited by Michelis, 'Where Bees Pray on Their Knees', p. 344.

language of touch is used, not as a metaphor for internal 'spectral mechanics', but to suggest the thermo-physical register actually impacts on the mental faculties.<sup>88</sup>

In addition to the use of the specific expression 'the ghost in the machine' and the appearance of Descartes, imagery of ghosts and machines recurs throughout all six of Roberts's collections. A particular example of this is a series of hymns dedicated to machines in the collection *Drysalter*, included as 'Hymn to a Hurricane Booth' (103), 'Hymn to a Karaoke Booth' (148), 'Hymn to a Rollercoaster' (80) and 'Hymn to a Car Factory' (100). The following readings will demonstrate that Roberts's poems about ghosts and machines attempt to negotiate their way out of the deadlock of traditional Cartesian mind-body dualism through a series of reversals figured in the language of touch. These reversals include the machine being figured as a body, and the figuration of the human body as the ghost in the machine.

If Descartes writes that one might think of 'the body of a man as a kind of machine', then in *Drysalter* the machine is repeatedly portrayed as a kind of body. For instance, the poem 'Hymn to the Drivers' seems to be more in praise of the machine than its operator, and the opening lines equate cars with bodies:

Every second a child is born, a car is made;  
knitted together in factory towns  
by robot arms with sparks at their fingertips. (12)

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<sup>88</sup> Ryle, p. 9.

Here, machines are passing their life-giving sparks through the language of touch on to other machines, so that 'born' and 'made' become synonymous. Particularly relevant in these terms is Haraway's discourse around cyborgs, which is evoked by Roberts's repeated personification of machines. While the second verse of 'Hymn to the Drivers' focuses on the human children waiting to grow old enough to drive, the final verse focuses on the car itself. This time however the car is described in the language of touch. The machine is rendered both animal and organic, as Roberts writes that 'Even at night, car power is palpable. | Under linden trees they rest on haunches, | Colour indeterminate in sodium light'. It is in this figuration of the car as animal, that Roberts's engagement with machine-related imagery begins to bear most strongly on discourses around the post-human, particularly in the way both Roberts's poem and Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* challenge Cartesian dualism.

For Haraway, cyborgs ('couplings between organism and machine') offer an alternative to the 'oedipal project' rooted in a white, masculine, Biblical, Western tradition.<sup>89</sup> The cyborg does not take part in this narrative as it does not share in the paradisiacal origin story or its correlative apocalyptic, teleological outcome. The cyborg 'is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust'.<sup>90</sup> The figuration of cyborgs then, in a poetry collection such as *Drysalter*, which explicitly engages with the paradisiacal origin story in poems such as 'The Original Zoo' (*DS*, 42), can be thought of as a staging of Haraway's cyborg-project, and its aim of 'subverting the

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<sup>89</sup> Haraway, p. 150.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

structure and modes of reproduction of 'Western' identity, of nature and culture, of mirror and eye, slave and master, body and mind'.<sup>91</sup> In the central verse of 'Hymn to the Drivers' for instance, the human child watching the parent driving results in a decidedly cyborgian image:

And the children wait for them, a-stagger  
on their slow pins, they watch the elders  
slide behind tinted windscreens, lips  
in time with the radio. Deliverance comes  
as a set of keys and a card in your name.

The most complete integration of human and machine in the poem is in the synchronised vocalisation of machine and human, the 'lips | in time with the radio'. The formative influence of car on child, culminating in the 'deliverance' of receiving your keys, suggests that freedom is freedom as cyborg. There is also an extent to which, through the foregrounding of the theme of production and making, introduced by the previous stanza, the poem stages Haraway's suggestions that 'it is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine'.<sup>92</sup> In this context, the etymological origin of the word *poet* in the Greek for 'maker', and the fact that writing is 'pre-eminently the technology of cyborgs',<sup>93</sup> a degree of ambiguity is even extended to poems themselves, as an inherently cyborgian intersection between human and technology in which the lines between *poiesis* and *techne* are blurred.

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 176.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 176.

In this regard, the discussion broaches the writings of N. Katherine Hayles, who writes, as a result of her particular focus on the material aspect of text production, that 'literary texts, like us, have bodies',<sup>94</sup> and that 'texts must always be embodied to exist in the world'.<sup>95</sup> Tensions inherent in the ghost in the machine configuration and the exchange between immaterial and material are evident in her notion of the 'material metaphor': 'a term that foregrounds the traffic between words and physical artefacts'.<sup>96</sup> For Hayles, the duality of immaterial and material is marked by the extent to which the material affects the immaterial: 'To change the material artefact is to transform the context and circumstances for interacting with the words, which inevitably changes the meanings of the words'.<sup>97</sup> As will be evidenced below, in the context of Roberts's poetry, this dynamic translates into the way the machine is sometimes privileged over the ghost to the point where the machine even assumes the figure of poet.

In Roberts's poetry, machines are repeatedly conferred body-like qualities. In 'Hymn to a Car Factory' (101), the machines are again likened to animals ('[...] rows of robot arms, | tilted at the tail like beak-down birds'), and simultaneously identified as workers, living beings with their own agency:

[...] Their work,

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<sup>94</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2002), p. 107.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

these flightless freaks, these corvines  
—who have to scavenge to survive—  
is to pick at the skeletons of family sedans.

In 'Hymn to a Hurricane Booth', a hurricane booth also needs to eat, 'I feed it coins' (105). In addition to these configurations, which are exemplified by the series of hymns to machines, one might also include a number of hymns or songs by machines. There is the song of warning in 'Hymn to a Karaoke Booth' ('burnt into the locked screen warns the song', 150). There is also the song of watchfulness in 'Desert Hermits' where the 'Air-con units hum their vigil' (43). Both songs render the machine as poet. In 'Desert Hermits', other machines are given a voice, such as the pool filter which 'sucks | and gibbers' (43). 'Hymn to a Photo Booth' even sees the speaker position in the poem assumed by a machine: 'Now wait while I spit out your mugshots' (7). The most explicit cyborg in the collection, however, is the automatic soothsaying booth, which is a machine stating in its own voice that it can be thought of as a man's body:

I'm half a man, so legless, a torso on a plank,  
my name is not Destino, but your own name in reverse. (139)

The reversal of Descartes's 'the body of a man as a kind of machine' into the machine as a kind of body in *Drysalter* is echoed in the way the name Destino backwards reads 'on its 'ed'. Reversals such as this one suggest that in constituting the machine as embodied, it is always inevitably constituted as en-souled at the

same time. The modern cyborg in Roberts's poetry blurs the distinction between animal, human, ghost and machine, between body and soul. At first it even appears to corroborate Haraway's suggestion that 'cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves'.<sup>98</sup> However, in Roberts's poetry there is also an extent to which, every time the machine is embodied, it inevitably becomes en-souled by default. So even though the car in 'Hymn to the Drivers' is animalised ('haunches'), and made into a body, by the end it is rendered again into a ghostly possibility ('coiled, not cataleptic') full of potential ('the road as open, wet with lime leaves'), but still in need of an operator.

When Haraway writes that 'pre-cybernetic machines could be haunted; there was always the spectre of the ghost in the machine',<sup>99</sup> she suggests that for the cyborg itself, no haunting is possible. There is no interior-exterior binary within which haunting can occur. In Roberts's elaboration of the Cartesian position in which the human body becomes the soul of the machine, however, this deadlock is not so much transcended as physicalized. The result is that Roberts's poetry does not escape the binary so much as narrow the gap between ghost and machine, closing it as far as possible, while still insisting on it.

The concretisation of the Cartesian position is exemplified in several poems. In 'Hymn to a Hurricane Booth' (105) for instance, the subject is positioned inside the

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<sup>98</sup> Haraway, p. 181.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

booth looking at the outside world, like a Cartesian homunculus looking at the material world from inside the body. The outside world is subject to time and rapid decay ('shops change hands, close down, the mall streams | tail-light trails from days, months, years. | My kids point, laugh, then jitter, grow and leave.'). Inside, however, time does not seem to pass at all ('and though I know my money buys a minute | this feels like a lifetime's reckoning.'). The exterior is subject to the laws of physics, while in the interior a metaphysical exemption from these laws takes place. This classically Cartesian figuration (a single soul attached to a single body) is seemingly countered by 'Hymn to a Karaoke Booth' (150), in which *two* bodies find themselves together. However, when Roberts writes that 'burnt into the locked screen warns the song: | *you will never never never know me*', this poem ultimately also exemplifies another aspect of the Cartesian mind-body problem: the problem of other minds. Similarly, in 'Hymn to a Tollbooth' (37), in which the speaker is in their car, reflecting on the tollbooth operator, the poem again exemplifies the problem of other minds. Although the tollbooth operator has taken the driver's money, she is not responding, and the driver has no way of getting in touch with her inside the booth: 'My window's down but hers is up and locked. | Her head's stuck in a book and nothing moves.' In 'Hymn to a Photo Booth' (7), a photo booth gives instructions to its occupant, and the Cartesian ghost-machine configuration is alluded to when the poem reflects the Cartesian attempt at locating the meeting point of body and mind in the pineal gland ('Feel for the point where soul meets skull | | a bone fuse or knuckle in your neck | that keeps you of a piece'). It further employs the Cartesian lexicon of interiority and exteriority, ordering the occupant



to 'Look empty, | never smile', while the ghostliness of the occupant is eventually demonstrated by the words: 'Flash. You have been shot.'

The obvious separation between physical and metaphysical is demonstrated again in the following lines from the poem 'A Plate for a Face' (*DS*, 74):

Pilot of your own automaton,  
you drift with pallid sympathy through  
siege towns, riots, warzones,

fragile but illegible, until the midday  
sun turns bone-ash china see-through,  
reveals the inner workings of your pity.

In this poem, the interior is connected to the realm of emotions ('the inner workings of your pity'), while the physical body is a piloted 'automaton'. It is, in particular, the word 'pilot', which is reminiscent of Descartes, when he writes that he is not present in his body 'as a pilot in his ship'. The word 'automaton', however, is reminiscent of Sigmund Freud, who discusses the automaton as one of the key 'impressions, processes and situations that can arouse an especially strong and distinct sense of that uncanny in us'.<sup>100</sup> This connection to psychoanalytic discourse is also recognisable in the way the poem 'reveals the inner workings of your pity', since 'inner workings' and the way these correlate to exterior psychic stimuli are

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<sup>100</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. by David McLintock, The New Penguin Freud (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 135.

broadly what Freud's essay is about. Freud's automaton, too, is haunted by its own sense of ghostliness. The Freudian automaton is linked to childhood impulses — the wish for or fear of one's inanimate dolls or toys coming to life.<sup>101</sup> The ghostliness is created by the trace of childhood memories in the unconscious, which are both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. In this sense, while playing on similar registers, the poem 'A Plate for a Face', even though it uses the term 'automaton', plays more clearly on the image of Cartesian 'pilot in his ship' than the Freudian conception of the term, as any connection to the Freudian automaton and its connotations of childhood fear and desires is not borne out by the rest of the poem.

In an apparent contradiction of his own position of a marked separation of body and mind as staged by Roberts in 'A Plate for a Face', Descartes also writes that in fact 'I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and the body form a unit'.<sup>102</sup> This position does not exactly counter the initial position taken by Descartes ('the body of a man as a kind of machine'). In a semantic sense, the word 'intermingled' simply suggests a closing of the gap between material and immaterial, on which the interior-exterior positioning of the ghost in the machine relies. Roberts presents this intermingling, for instance, in the idea of the 'bodily soul' as an alternative to the 'ghost of a ghost-| in-the-machine' in the poem 'Mapping the Genome (I)'. It is also exemplified in the poem 'Hymn to the Falschfahrer':

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>102</sup> Descartes, p. 56.

## HYMN TO THE FALSCHFAHRER

To the rider who tears to the end of a slip road

(not because he hairpins into the teeth of the flow,  
to the rhythm of tilt and counter-tilt between  
oncoming cars, a compass needle twitching north  
but on the southbound carriageway;  
not because he takes his ride at night without lights,  
nor because it sings of salmon's upstream rush,  
—he is not heading for the source of road,  
some tarmac spring up in the hills, not that—  
but simply because he is a seeker after friction,  
winding back the old road so his wheels coil  
tighter, tauter, then with all his muster  
coiled and held he turns, kicks down, and powers  
into the future, pulling us in tailwind after)

to him and his machine be praise, hallow, traction. (110)

At first, this poem demonstrates in its poetic form another Cartesian reversal: the machine inside the ghost. Thirteen lines of the poem are contained in parentheses, and sandwiched between two lines which form the main part of the sentence.

However, if one reflects on the sense of the word *body* to denote the 'main portion' of something (*OED*), then what stands in parenthesis is in fact the body of the poem. One might then, in turn, consider the two lines from which this middle

section is derived to be the main clause to the bodily sub-clause, in other words, the ghost or the soul of the poem: 'To the rider who tears to the end of a slip road | [...] | to him and his machine be praise, hallow, traction.' In this case, by sandwiching the body of the poem between its most essential components, the poem sets the soul up as container of the body, or the machine inside the ghost.

Within the body of the poem, ghost and machine become again semantically intermingled. When the poem says 'he is a seeker after friction, | winding back the old road so his wheels coil | tighter, tauter', the possessive pronoun ('his wheels') suggests the wheels belong to the driver not the car, not simply as possession, but actually as an integrated part of a unit. The binary opposition set up in praise of the driver 'and his machine', is offset by this 'bodily soul' of driver and car 'pulling us in tailwind after'. The idea of the driver as the car's ghost is even intuited in the title, since a synonym for the German *Falschfahrer* is *Geisterfahrer*, literally *ghost-driver*.

However, the *Falschfahrer*, as opposed to the *Geisterfahrer*, as well as representing the Cartesian ghost-machine configuration in Roberts's poem, also suggests something in terms of Roberts's movement to avoid fixed binaries of ghost and machine. The *Falschfahrer* is also the *wrong-driver*, that is, a driver who drives on the wrong side of the road against the traffic. In Germany, the *Falschfahrer* is someone who is guilty of breaking the *Vertrauensgrundsatz*, the basic principle by which one can trust other drivers to follow the rules of the road. The driver is only wrong though within the context of the system within which he drives. Similarly,

the individual constellations of ghost and machine in Roberts's poetry, whether they are Rylean or Cartesian, are only wrong or right within a wider philosophical context, which they either confirm or contradict. In Roberts's poetry however, the context is one of change. There is no overarching position for an individual constellation to confirm or contradict. It is precisely the change from one different binary to another that constitutes the general rule of the system within which they occur.

At first, rather than find a way out of the deadlock of traditional Cartesian mind-body dualism, as Haraway's cyborg does, Roberts's poetry more often than not seems to demand it in his figurations. However, the figurations of Cartesian mind-body dualism are varied and often contradictory, the ghost variously featuring as being contained in or as container of the machine. At first, this might seem to leave Roberts's poetry endlessly running, in Haraway's words, round 'the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves' (see above), or in the language of the *Falschfahrer*, driving up the road on the wrong side. However, another reading sees the movement generated between the different constellations of machine and ghost as a reflection of what it is to be a Cartesian subject in the contemporary world. Ryle's attempt to 'put the final nail in the coffin of Cartesian dualism' was unsuccessful, because it failed to acknowledge that mind-body dualism is not simply a theoretical problem, but a way in which the world is not just understood, but also experienced. As a form of experiential understanding then, Roberts's poetry offers the 'epistemology of touch', by which the sense of the machine ('The sensation of you whispered on my | fingertips for

days') always eventually gives way to the ghost ('the map in my memory | for weeks before the details fell away'), before being reprised ('Then I wanted to know you again').

In 'Robotic Skin: the future of touch?', Claudia Castañeda asks whether or not it is possible for a robot to have skin. In some senses, the question is not so different from asking whether a machine has a ghost, as posed by Roberts's poetry. Both questions blur the boundaries drawn between human and machine in the context of post-human discourse. In her considerations of AI technology and robots that touch, one conclusion Castañeda draws is that the power dynamic between robot and human in these actual experiments always remains in favour of the human. The research team "'tinker" with [the robot], but [the robot] does not tinker with them'.<sup>103</sup> Her conclusion is that skin is not a guarantee of mutual exchange, but offers only the possibility of it. By contrast, I would argue that in the configurations in Roberts's poetry, the machine does 'tinker' with the human profoundly, by raising questions in regard to where the human ends and the machine begins. Ultimately, what this movement in Roberts's poetry maps is both the machine-like quality of the ghost and the ghostliness of the machine, a mapping which never concludes satisfactorily and must always be undertaken again. Looking towards the next chapter section, this repeated movement is also reflected in the way the body is related to the soul in Roberts's poetry, and the way the focus of his writing is rarely on a fixed point in a physical-metaphysical binary, but much more on the

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<sup>103</sup> Claudia Castañeda, 'Robotic Skin: the future of touch?', in *Thinking Through the Skin*, ed. by Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp.223-236 (p. 234).

space between two points, and on the movement this space makes possible for the lyric subject. Furthermore, the example of the body-soul binary emphasises the significance of Roberts's poetics on our understanding of contemporary experience as one in which, rather than assume fixed positions, such as a Cartesian or a materialist one, the subject is constantly shifting between physical-metaphysical structures, and in a constant process of having to re-establish them.

### **Body and Soul: Writing into the Gaps between the Corporeal and Spiritual**

Roberts's poetry is marked by a particular preoccupation with the soul, a preoccupation which forms part of his wider interest in the relationship between the physical and the metaphysical, the touchable and the untouchable. What is particular to the use of the soul in Roberts's poetry, however, is the way in which the lyric *I* finds itself not constituted of soul and/or body, but is instead constituted between them. The wider significance of this issue is that, if as Suzanne Nalbantian writes, 'each era's literary metaphor of the soul reflects its religious and philosophical attitudes', it raises the question of what Roberts's multiple, often contradictory, figurations reflect in terms of contemporary attitudes.<sup>104</sup>

In the previous two sections, several of Roberts's figurations of the soul have already been discussed. The first section demonstrated the way in which the spark correlated with certain Metaphysical notions of the soul, and in the second section, the same thing is evidenced in the idea of the ghost. Rather than looking at

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<sup>104</sup> Nalbantian, p. 6.

symbolic representations of the soul however, this third chapter section will be considering poems in which the soul is used explicitly. What both spark and ghost demonstrated in the previous sections was that Roberts's notion of the metaphysical is ideologically informed by Christian theology. Building on this, the concluding section of Chapter 1 will demonstrate the extent to which Roberts's use of the soul is contextualised by a series of poetic traditions, from Metaphysical poetry to Romanticism to Modernism, by way of the poets Vaughan, Wordsworth and Eliot. It will also engage with the writings of Rowan Williams, setting out the extent to which the soul in Roberts's poetry corresponds with wider, contemporary theological concerns. As with the other tropes — shell and sparks, ghost and machine — I will argue that Roberts's body-soul constellation does not assign itself to a single position. Roberts's poetry includes both Romantic and Modernist conceptions of the soul, as well as positioning the soul as variously interior to the body as well as exterior. The focus is once again much more on what is between the two points in the binary, than on the points themselves. In my chapter conclusion, I will show how this position resonates in a wider sense, with contemporary philosophical and theological discourses.

In *The Symbol of the Soul*, Nalbantian considers the representation of the soul in nineteenth century poetry, from Wordsworth's Romanticism to the first stages of Eliot's Modernism. The progress of the soul as a symbol in poetry over the course of the century, according to Nalbantian, develops from something essentially spiritual to something sensual and physical, from being associated with childhood to



becoming itself subject to old age.<sup>105</sup> Above all, the soul progresses between Wordsworth's usage and Eliot's from being something marked for its capacity to dynamically ascend to being trapped in a kind of 'paralysis'.<sup>106</sup> It finally gives way completely to the twenty-first-century 'phenomenology of the self'.<sup>107</sup> With regards to the lyric *I*, Nalbantian describes a progress from monologic meditation (soul as self) to a dialogue between self and soul. While for Wordsworth 'the soul is interchangeable with the "I"'<sup>108</sup>, over the course of the century, the soul develops into a 'symbol suggestive of the state of the subject', and eventually into a 'persona in dialogue' through which 'it has an existence of its own, independent and even antithetical to the writer who created the dialogue'.<sup>109</sup> It is from this final position that the soul can eventually be abandoned completely, without compromising any sense of self. Nalbantian writes:

Where there were intimations of immortality in the earlier poet [Wordsworth] and in the climate which he reflected, here [in Eliot] the intimations have become whispers, which like the correlative of the withered leaves, fade and disappear.<sup>110</sup>

The 'intimations of immortality' in the Romantic conception of the soul, writes Nalbantian, correlate to the soul's 'transcendent' quality, which identifies the Romantic soul (as with Roberts) as being ultimately Christian in provenance.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> See 'Chapter 7: The Stylistic Alchemy', in Nalbantian, pp. 100-118.

<sup>106</sup> Nalbantian, p. 98.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

Consistent with this understanding is the way the soul in Wordsworth's poetry is able to transcend the body. Like the Metaphysical poets before him, Wordsworth is found to conceive of the body as a prison for the soul.<sup>112</sup> Eliot, in turn, figures the soul as a weight to be shed ('The heavy burden of the growing soul').<sup>113</sup>

Nalbantian's study raises the question of whether the soul does, as she writes, 'fade and disappear' or whether its trajectory progresses into the contemporary era in any way. If the historical-literary progress of the soul really is arrested completely after the turn of the twentieth century, how can one explain the preoccupation with the soul in Roberts's contemporary poetry? Nalbantian argues that the word soul eventually 'survives its significance', but only 'in the form of cliché'.<sup>114</sup> While I will argue that Roberts's figurations of the soul are anything but clichés, in contemporary critical literature there is evidence of exactly such a transformation with regard to the use of the word. In *Soul Says: On Recent Poetry* for instance, Helen Vendler (quoting Jorie Graham) describes the lyric as 'the voice of the soul itself'.<sup>115</sup> Initially, Vendler connects the soul ('independent of time and space') with lyric poetry, as opposed to the 'self', which she connects to the novel ('historical and spatial').<sup>116</sup> Later, however, Vendler suggests that the Yeatsian 'self' is the equivalent of Graham's 'soul' and that 'these are terms that can be defined at will'. What remains of the soul's particular etymological provenance in Vendler's use of

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>113</sup> Eliot in Nalbantian, p. 98.

<sup>114</sup> Nalbantian, p. 7.

<sup>115</sup> Helen Vendler, *Soul Says: On Recent Poetry* (Cambridge, MA and London, UK: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 3.

<sup>116</sup> Vendler, p. 5.

the word (and which would resist being 'defined at will') is at best a Romantic sense of the soul as authentic. Wordsworth's description of the soul as being capable of 'genuine insight',<sup>117</sup> finds a faint echo in Vendler's assertion that 'to me, what soul says seems convincing'.<sup>118</sup> The notion of being 'defined at will', though, ultimately renders the word vague and ambiguous, ignoring any particular provenance it might have.

There are others, like Nalbantian, who link the poetic trope 'soul' to the functions of the lyric *I*. In *Poetry's Touch: On Lyric Address*, William Waters demonstrates the way the soul draws attention to questions of both who is speaking and who is being addressed. In a reading of Else Lasker-Schüler's poem 'Ein alter Tibetteppich', Waters identifies how the line 'Your soul, which loveth mine' creates 'a third-person distance from both the addressee and the self, both of which are observed objects'.<sup>119</sup> By the same token, in Constantine Cavafy's 'Ides of March', the first line proclamation 'Fear honors and wealth, O soul' suggests a speaker addressing themselves; however, the developing context of the poem ultimately makes it 'increasingly hard to square with the notion of self-address'.<sup>120</sup> Both examples confirm Nalbantian's sense that over the course of the century, the soul, originally identified with a monologic lyric *I*, develops into an addressee as part of a dialogue with an *I* (at this point in time affiliated principally with the body). The soul is no longer necessarily a constituent part of the self or the *I*. Roberts's poetry will

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<sup>117</sup> Nalbantian, p. 14.

<sup>118</sup> Vendler, p. 8.

<sup>119</sup> William Waters, *Poetry's Touch: On Lyric Address* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 30.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

demonstrate the way in which this separation of soul and body, rather than compromising the soul, in fact creates a between-space, which becomes the very condition by which the lyric subject is constituted in the first place.

While there are many poetic figures traditionally used to represent the soul in poetry, from birds, leaves and phoenixes to spiders and sunflowers, the soul, as a figure itself — symbolised, predicated by similes or present in emblematic form — only ever represents itself. In Michael Ferber's *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols* (2007), the soul appears under all these entries as something represented, but has no entry of its own. While the soul is like many things (birds, leaves, phoenixes, etc.), there is nothing like the soul. Drawing on the critical vocabulary of I.A. Richards, the soul is always the tenor and never the vehicle.<sup>121</sup> As such, the following readings will feature only instances in which Roberts's poetry directly treats the soul, and not through symbolic stand-ins such as the ghost in the machine or the spark and the flint. These readings will demonstrate how Roberts's poetry draws attention not so much to either the tenor or the vehicle, but to the movement from one to the other.

The multiple figurations of the soul in Roberts's poetry reflect the 'host of meanings and designations' the soul has acquired through 'endless philosophical speculations in the history of thought'.<sup>122</sup> The overarching position in Roberts's poetry is significant, however, not for its lack of fixed position, but for the movement

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<sup>121</sup> See I.A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (New York: Galaxy Books, 1965).

<sup>122</sup> Nalbantian, p. 1.

between these positions as experienced by the lyric *I*. This movement can be traced by considering the repeated reconfigurations of the soul as variously interior or exterior to the body, with often two opposing constellations of the body-soul binary played off against each other in the same poem. (By interior and exterior I broadly mean the way in which the soul is contained in the body or the body is contained in the soul.)

Figurations of the soul as interior to the body nod to a Platonic tradition, which is still recognisable in a longstanding poetic convention by which the body is depicted as a prison for the immortal soul.<sup>123</sup> In a Christian context, with its emphasis on transcendence, the metaphor is extended to include other kinds of exteriors, such as clothes.<sup>124</sup> At times, this tradition is self-consciously referenced in Roberts's poetry, and in 'What Divides Us', Roberts writes: 'If I believed the soul | was separate from the body, | I might describe myself as the soul of my clothes' (C, 42). Notable here, and apparently bearing out Nalbantian's trajectory, is the way in which the *I* uses the conditional 'if' to distance itself from an antiquated position in which the *I* is interchangeable with the soul. The affirmative version of this statement implies instead that *I*-body-soul are part and parcel of the same unit. However, rather than make this affirmative statement, the poet has chosen, albeit disguised in the conditional, to position the *I* outside of body and soul to reflect on the fact that the *I* does not believe in the separation of the two.

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

Not all of Roberts's figurations of the interior soul are couched in the conditional though, and some figure the soul affirmatively in the Christian language of resurrection. In the poem 'Fox in a Man Suit', a vixen disguised as a man returns from a party to her home in the 'edgelands | | where — rubbed on the shuck of a tree — | her man-skin peels off'. It is already notable that spiritual transcendence takes place in a tactile register ('rubbed'), accentuated by the (thermal) physical register that develops when her 'Tongue drinks in the cold, | | nose down in leaf mould, deep rush and tow | of attachment, of instinct'. The lyric *I*, however, is once again positioned outside of the man-body/fox-soul constellation, and 'I, the only witness, | take this for a resurrection (body sloughed | and after-life as fox-soul)'. (HH, 13)

'Fox in a Man Suit' demonstrates how the soul interior to the body is often portrayed as another kind of body in Roberts's poetry. For Roberts, the body serves as a 'kind of common ground' which can 'express something of our shared religious longings', while at the same time 'it reaches into other rich areas of our culture, including genetics and bioethics':

The body feels like particularly interesting and contested ground at the moment, because as a culture we don't know whether we want to worship or deny it, subdue it or preserve it forever.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Roberts, 'Poetry in a Post-Secular Age', p. 72.

In *The Evolution of the Soul*, Richard Swinburne suggests that in relation to the body, the notion of the soul might be understood in both religious and scientific discourses as being a shared movement towards establishing what is 'essential to me'.<sup>126</sup> In the poem 'Fox in a Man Suit', it is precisely this motion that is traced: the soul is what is left when everything else has been stripped away. This movement is identifiable in other poems too, such as the sequence 'Carniverous', in which a cook carves up a roast in which succeeding poems reveal a different, smaller animal stuffed inside the next (sow/lamb/goose/salmon). The bodies are stripped down to their final part, 'a shell-less snail, fattened on milk' (C, 31). The 'shell-less snail' in this reading becomes symbolic of the bodiless soul in the tradition of Augustine, which is simple, in the sense that in contrast to the body, it does not consist of different parts. By way of example, the body, if one were to remove a leg, would still be a body and the leg still a leg. A soul has no equivalent of such separate parts.<sup>127</sup> In the end, the snail can only be swallowed whole: 'The cook held the snail on a fork. No one replied so he swallowed it'. However, if the soul is 'essential to me', it is notable that the I in 'Fox in a Man Suit' is positioned outside of this dynamic, and that at exactly the point at which soul and body separate, it is the lyric I that 'unfurls' like a 'sleek red flower' as witness between them.

In the poem 'What the Body Cannot Hold', the traditional, interior soul is relegated in favour of a new conception of the soul. The new soul is found 'in multiples of touch, think, speak', and unlike the old soul is 'no longer inner and essential, | – not

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<sup>126</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Evolution of the Soul*, revised edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), p. x.

<sup>127</sup> Goetz and Taliaferro, p. 37.

some copper thread that runs through | every vein and holds me, keeps me of a piece'. The title alone suggests that the soul is no longer interior, but instead is something exceeding its bodily shell. This excess is reminiscent of Nancy's description of certain traditional notions of the soul, by which the soul is thought of as 'a vaporous identity escaping from the prison of the body'.<sup>128</sup> However, 'What the Body Cannot Hold' is not a depiction of the soul ascending from the body, but rather, the soul as exceeding its own interiorisation. The soul — rather than being essential, simple and interior to a single / — is constituted in the exchange with the addressee of the poem ('multiples of touch, think, speak'). As such, it is exterior to the body with which the / is in this case equated.

In its simplest form, the soul as an exterior occurs when it functions as a container itself (as opposed to being contained in a body). Many of these figurations are detectable through the use of the spatial preposition 'in': 'Thoughts of other people are opaque | the weather in their souls a mystery.' (*DS*, 44). Similarly, when 'Four names from the bottom of your soul | were sobbed in sleep into the hot hotel room' (*RS*, 9), the words begin in the interior of the soul and make their way to the exterior. Another example is the soul's capacity as container of the letter 'o' ('O as in love, in H<sub>2</sub>O, in soul' *HH*, 9).

However, there are also exteriorisations, which like 'Fox in a Man Suit' adopt a tactile concretisation of the soul, and through which soul, body and / are brought

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<sup>128</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. by Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 127.



into a particular configuration. In 'Soul Song (I)' for instance, a man has 'a woman tattooed on his back | her thighs on his, calf to calf, tapered | down to ankles, heels' (*DS*, 25). At first, 'He called her his soul-mate, then his soul'. In this poem, the new 'vascular' soul, tattooed along the lengths of the body, is depicted in a sense simply as another body with a material capacity to age. This new soul drives out the man's 'true' and 'luminous' soul, which is separate from the body. The contiguity demonstrated here between the language of touch and the material effects of time on the body have poetic precedence, famously in Wordsworth's poem 'A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal' ('A slumber did my spirit seal; | I had no human fears: | She seem'd a thing that could not feel | The touch of earthly years'<sup>129</sup>). In a sense, Roberts's poem can be seen as staging a struggle between what are Platonic and Aristotelian conceptions of the soul. Aristotelian conceptions of the soul (inseparable from the body and mortal) and Platonic conceptions of the soul (separate from the body and immortal) can be broadly traced as interweaving throughout the history of Western thought, to the point where they culminate in Cartesian mind-body dualism on the one hand and scientific materialism on the other.<sup>130</sup> In intervening Medieval Christian thought, the Platonic history of the soul also finds its ways into the writings of Augustine, from whom we get the idea of the soul as being simple and having no parts. This is represented by Roberts in the poem's 'true' and 'luminous' soul.<sup>131</sup> The Aristotelian trajectory, in turn, finds its expression in the writings of Aquinas, and the Aquinian notion of the soul is most

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<sup>129</sup> William Wordsworth, *Poems of William Wordsworth* (Hoboken, N.J.: BiblioBytes), eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) [accessed: 2 July 2015], p. 34.

<sup>130</sup> *Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward Craig (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 851.

<sup>131</sup> Goetz and Taliaferro, p. 37.

closely represented in Roberts's poetry by the 'bodily soul' in 'Mapping the Genome (I)' (*RS*, 16).

The way the transcendent soul in 'Soul Song (I)' 'took umbrage, | upped and left without a note', ousted by an aging mortal soul, depicts the trajectory outlined by Nalbantian. In this respect, Roberts's poetry again demonstrates a degree of self-consciousness towards the fact that the poem is staging notions of the soul which are deeply rooted in different traditions, and that 'This is not an anecdote, but fable, | I should tell you'. This time, the *I* is positioned outside not just one configuration of body and soul, but mediates between two rival ideas. The struggle between these two ideas can also be identified in the poem 'Hymn to November'. The poem states that 'There is no way to the soul | but through the body' (*DS*, 27), which might either be seen to mean that the body contains the soul, or that the soul is inextricably part of the body. In the last chapter of this thesis, it will also be suggested that this is an example of Weilean 'metaxu'.

A different sort of tactility is created in poems in which the soul is constituted through the exchange of physical touch, on the exterior of two bodies, or when two souls are brought to touch each other. In 'What the Body Cannot Hold', the traditional soul is negated ('not some copper thread that runs through | every vein and holds me, keeps me of a piece'), and replaced with the idea of the soul as 'lucent conurbation'. This urban soul is constituted in part through the exchange with others ('multiples of touch, think, speak'). Significantly, there is room inside the soul for more than one person ('Sit with me under flowering cherries, | now, in

Spring'). In the final lines of the poem, even the body's physical interior is exteriorised by the excessive, exteriorising and multiplying force of the soul: 'And all my cells | are cities too; stand under lime, palm, elm | in Vilnius, Krakow, Cairo, meet me there'. By the end of the poem, it is difficult to identify the precise nature of the 'me': a body inside a city, whose cells are also cities in which it wants to meet someone exterior to itself. It is impossible in this sense for the *I* to be constituted by either soul or body as they are constantly exceeding and inhabiting each other. However, like the soul constituted in 'multiples of touch, think, speak', the *I* is positioned in the exchange between them.

The notion of the soul as exchange is echoed in the poem 'Night Train', although in this poem it is the idea of the soul as tactile exchange which is negated through the use of the conditional 'would', when the speaker says:

[...] I would like to say  
our thoughts, as passengers, crack  
  
between us like static cloud, and *soul*  
means a million points of interconnection  
and bind, but none of this is true tonight. (*DS*, 67)

The effect of the conditional is again to position the *I* outside of or between a hypothetical body-soul constellation. In the poem 'Soul Song (II)', a very similar exteriorisation occurs. The subject of the poem describes how 'if I looked at you in

love, complete | | in utter darkness, I would see | a swarm of fireflies, carriers | of every half-formed thought, your history' (*DS*, 107). This time the tactile exchange occurs between two souls, which are brought to touch when 'with each breath and kiss | your filigree of sparks would cloud | and cross with mine'. This is experienced as a physical sensation when the speaker encourages the addressee to 'feel the hairs lift on your neck, | | that static charge, and know that we | have met our souls, invisible but physical'. At first, the series of possessives ('your filigree of sparks', 'mine', 'your neck', 'our souls') suggest that the *I* and the *you* are in fact constituted from their body and their soul. However, at the same time as laying claim to something, possessives necessarily separate the *I* from what it owns as owner. Separation then, which is the condition of touch in Roberts's poetry, is also the condition by which one can describe something as 'mine' in the first place, so that 'our souls' and 'our' cannot be identified as the same thing.

Finally, there are those poems in which neither soul nor body function as container for each other. In the poem 'Corpse', for instance, the body is 'splayed | on the road's crown like a shot bird', while the 'Circuitry of soul | is broken'. Even though both are damaged, at the same time, the damage to each is presented separately. Rather than inhabiting each other, the two are positioned as being contiguous. By contrast, in the poem 'Mapping the Genome (I)', rather than search for the locus of the soul in the body, the addressee of the poem, *you*, is mapped to the entire constellation of a 'bodily soul' ('The desire to know, to map you to your | bodily soul, not some ghost of a ghost- | in-the-machine'). In this poem, the *I* and the *you* are most explicitly constituted in exchange, through the 'new epistemology of

touch'. The subjects are produced not so much between body and soul, as between two 'bodily souls'.

The movement of constant reconfiguration with regard to the body and the soul in Roberts's poetry, means that the poetry, rather than offering a fixed position on these concepts, addresses the much wider question of what the *I* or *you* is that the body and soul are attributed to in the first place. In a significant number of Roberts's soul poems, it is the poem's lyric address from *I* to *you* that remains the constant, while the soul and body change their configuration. Furthermore, the lyric subject appears to be constituted outside or between the configuration, whatever shape it ultimately takes. However, mapping the *I* from one configuration to another through the language of touch, also reveals the extent to which the lyric *I*, as a constant is constituted not just between body and soul, but in the movement between the poems themselves. This is echoed by Nancy when he writes:

What we so often designate Cartesian "dualism" can therefore be understood as entirely different from an ontological cut between body and soul. It is just as much, and may be even more, an ontology of the "between," of the swerve of exposition by which alone something like a "subject" can emerge.<sup>132</sup>

The swerve becomes a particularly useful way of imagining the movement of the lyric speaker position, particularly with regard to possible criticism of the argument made so far. The word *swerve* as used by Nancy has its own philosophical

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<sup>132</sup> Nancy, *Corpus*, p. 143.

provenance in the Lucretian *clinamen*: 'a "swerve" of the atoms so as to make change possible in the universe'. Harold Bloom uses the notion of the swerve to outline the structure of his theory in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), illustrating the way 'a poet swerves away from his precursor, by so reading his precursor's poem as to execute a clinamen in relation to it'.<sup>133</sup> The ghost of Descartes haunts Bloom's book as much as it does Roberts's poetry. Bloom identifies Cartesianism as being responsible for creating a certain gap, 'the dumbfounding abyss between ourselves and the object',<sup>134</sup> offering the poet one of only two 'anti-poetic' options: idealism or materialism. This choice echoes the points of movement in Nalbantian's trajectory of the soul, and echoes the post-Rylean configurations discussed in the previous chapter section on the ghost in the machine, which draw attention to the space this binary leaves open between its two points. According to Bloom, the Romantic poets in particular, attempt to bridge this gap unsuccessfully, remaining, with the exception of Blake, largely Cartesian. A particular echo of Roberts's poetry and its genealogical connection to Vaughan can also be recognised in Bloom's assertion that 'the Cartesian myth or abyss of consciousness nevertheless took the fire from the flint'.<sup>135</sup> As illustrated in the first chapter section, the flint and the spark provide the leitmotif to Roberts's collection *Raising Sparks*, a theme that consciously echoes Vaughan's collection *Silex Scintillans* (the sparking flint). While the flint represents the physical, the spark is its metaphysical correlative, and can be read as analogous with notions of the soul. Bloom uses the analogy to lament

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<sup>133</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, second edition (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 14.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

the lack of an integrated existence between spark and flint, doomed as they are to be separated. There is a sense in which this also carries a trace of Eliot's lament concerning the 'dissociation of sensibility', which will be picked up again in Chapter 2.<sup>136</sup> By contrast, Roberts's poetry stages both idealist and materialist figurations and invests heavily in the gap between them.

If Roberts's poetry can be said to stage various contradictory historical-literary conceptions of the soul, from Wordsworth to Eliot, then these contradictions and reversals are part of an overarching poetic position. In this case, however, it must also be pointed out, that in the course of their poetic development, Wordsworth and Eliot, as the examples used by Nalbantian, are also not completely rigid in terms of the configuration of the soul. Over the years, Wordsworth for instance increasingly begins to contextualise the soul 'in a more Christian orthodox context'.<sup>137</sup> Similarly, Eliot, in the course of his career, 'submits to conversion and reinforced Christian faith'.<sup>138</sup> Therefore, the idea of a progression of the soul across a poet's work is not unique to Roberts's poetry.

What is remarkable and particularly contemporary about Roberts's poetry is the self-consciousness he expresses towards the configuration of different historical positions on the soul. In this sense, Roberts's poetry constitutes a poetic discourse on the question of the soul. Those tropes, which are non-historical, and which place

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<sup>136</sup> T.S. Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, ed. by Ronald Schuchard (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 55.

<sup>137</sup> Nalbantian, p. 13.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

their emphasis on the soul as something constituted in between bodies, are in turn echoed by a much broader contemporary theological and philosophical discourse, as exemplified by Nancy's reading of Descartes. This thinking of 'the between' is also identifiable in Roberts's interest in Rowan Williams's theological 'attempt to write into and around the gaps, the fractures, the silence'.<sup>139</sup> Williams's interest in 'the between' finds its expression in at least two theological arguments he makes, the first regarding resurrection belief and the second concerned with New Testament ethics. In the first essay, 'Between the Cherubim: The Empty Tomb and the Empty Throne', Williams draws attention to a specific iconography of the resurrection when 'the angels at the tomb in John's gospel are seated one at the head and the other at the feet of the grave slab'.<sup>140</sup> In Williams's reading, the angels mark out 'a space where God would be if God were anywhere', and 'to "see" him is to look into the gap between the holy images'.<sup>141</sup> In the essay 'Interiority and Epiphany: A Reading in New Testament Ethics' however, 'the between' represents an area of exchange in which people come to constitute themselves and each other. Williams identifies contemporary notions of selfhood as being informed by the same Rylean and Cartesian legacy Roberts stages in his poetry. He writes:

Common to a good deal of contemporary philosophical reflection on human identity is the conviction that we are systematically misled, even corrupted, by a picture of the human agent as divided into an outside and an inside – a 'true self', hidden, buried, to be

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<sup>139</sup> Roberts, 'Poetry in a Post-Secular Age', p. 74.

<sup>140</sup> Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology: Challenges in Contemporary Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p. 186.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.



excavated by one or another kind of therapy (the modern 'philosophy of mind', the epistemological struggle) to the psychological therapy of another 'analytic' tradition [...]<sup>142</sup>

Instead, Williams suggests, 'self' is constituted in 'the world of exchange – language and interaction'.<sup>143</sup> As with Roberts's poetry, in Williams's writing it is the 'processes of encounters and exchange' which occur between people that draw his attention and not a 'buried inner agenda' inside them. Echoing Roberts even further is the way in which Williams's shift of attention to 'the between' is accompanied by a criticism of language of interiority and exteriority, writing that it 'becomes abundantly clear that my interiority is a construct that emerges through the labour of exchange'. Rather than dismiss interiority completely though, Williams acknowledges it as part of the nature of exchange ('which is not to say that it is a reducible, secondary phenomenal matter.').<sup>144</sup> In Roberts's poetry too, both positions are considered (internal and external), and the attention shifts to the movement and space of 'the between'.

Together, Williams's theology and Nancy's philosophy suggest the extent to which the soul in Roberts's poetry is reflective of a contemporary intellectual preoccupation with the significance not of fixing points in a binary (body or soul), or bridging the gap between idealism and materialism, but of acknowledging 'the between' for the movement it makes possible and as the space in which the lyric / is constituted. In this sense, Williams summarises something of the position which

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p. 239.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., p. 240.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., p. 241.

Roberts's poetry repeatedly draws attention to when he writes that 'the exchange of conversation and negotiations *are* the essence of what is going on, not unsatisfactory translations of a more fundamental script'.<sup>145</sup>

This final analysis of the body and the soul in Robert's poetry is to an extent applicable to his figurations of the shell and the spark, and the ghost and the machine as well. All three have as their signature a series of changing constellations of physical and metaphysical components, which draw attention to the movement between them. The shell and the spark, for instance, are remarkable for the upward movement, which indicates towards something beyond the text. Furthermore, the shell itself, with the double connotation of the verb form, is representative of the movement inherent in its capacity as a metaphor for metaphor itself. Finally, there is the way in which Roberts's poetry moves from one constellation of shell and spark to the other. This latter movement is particularly pronounced in the pairings of ghost and machine, in which the ghost and the machine variously inhabit each other. Roberts's poetry posits contradictory combinations of ghost and machine, and, as a result, blurs the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman. However, the ghost and machine and body and soul also draw attention to the movement between binary points, placing the emphasis of Roberts's poetry on a certain sense of exchange. This emphasis alludes to the speculative hinge on which the contact between touchable and untouchable pivots, the Cartesian meeting point of body and soul.

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., p. 241. See also pp. 184-196.

If Chapter 1 concentrated on the components of the binaries in question themselves (shell, spark, ghost, machine, body, soul), then the next chapter focuses on the above-mentioned meeting point. In Chapter 2, the attention focuses on the mechanics of 'the between' by considering the limits and edges of the binary components in question. These limits, by bordering each other, are at times what come to constitute the between-space. At other times the limit is the between-space itself. In both cases, by paying particular attention to the limits and edges in Roberts's poetry, the chapter demonstrates the extent to which a degree of untouchability is inherent in all contact. The first section of Chapter 2 considers the way in which Roberts brings binaries of ideas together in his contemporary development of the Metaphysical conceit. In this instance, Roberts's poetry demonstrates a particular interest in the limit of the conceit, a limit which it always fails to explicitly touch on or to reach. In its second section, Chapter 2 considers those in-between spaces, the 'edgelands', in which the urban and the rural are brought to touch. The notion of the edge becomes significant here for the way that it is figured as a place where the contact between the two spaces both does and does not occur. I will also argue that as a result of this, 'the between' becomes a space through which the lyric / finds itself being both constituted but also destabilised at the same time.

## CHAPTER 2: EXPOSING THE LIMITS AND EDGES OF TOUCH

Through his intertextual exchanges with the seventeenth-century Metaphysical poets Donne and Vaughan, Roberts establishes himself as a metaphysical poet of the twenty-first century. In the previous chapter, I have considered in particular the Anglo-Welsh tradition Roberts constructs between his own poetry, Vaughan and the modernist David Jones. The first half of Chapter 2 will consider a similar line of influence, but this time extending from Donne, through Eliot's critical rehabilitation of Donne, to a wider contemporary movement of twenty-first-century metaphysical poetry. Poets such as Paul Muldoon and Jo Shapcott, as well as Roberts, reflect the contemporary currency of Metaphysical poetry in their use of Metaphysical techniques. However, this chapter draws attention to the way in which Donne's historical position, marked by a transition from one worldview to another, is also echoed in Roberts's poetry. While Donne negotiates shifts in geographical understanding in particular, Roberts in turn addresses the mapping of the human genome. Both poets position themselves against a fault line in which scientific innovation challenges the subject's conception of its traditional place in the world.

The early twentieth century also saw a revival of Metaphysical poetry, galvanised by Eliot's review *The Metaphysical Poets* in 1921. Eliot's own understanding of why Metaphysical poetry had currency with his own contemporaries similarly sets itself against a faultline of divergent sensibilities, something he articulates through the notion of 'complexity':

We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*. Our civilisation comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing on a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poets must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning. [...] Hence we get something which looks very much like the conceit — we get, in fact, a method curiously similar to that of the ‘metaphysical poets’, similar also in its use of obscure words and of simple phrasing.<sup>1</sup>

Several of Eliot’s observations of seventeenth-century Metaphysical poetry can also be said to be true of the metaphysical poetry of Roberts and his contemporaries in the twenty-first century. Roberts’s poetry, it will be demonstrated, displays ‘a method curiously similar to that of the “metaphysical poets”’. Roberts’s work is marked by ‘simple phrasing’ and what might constitute ‘obscure words’ — if his use of a scientific vocabulary is categorised as such. There is also a sense in which his poetry does ‘force’ or ‘dislocate’ the ‘language into his meaning’: Roberts’s engagement with Donne is marked not only through intertextual exchanges, but also by Roberts’s use of ‘something which looks very much like the conceit’. Roberts develops Donne’s use of the conceit (and on occasion Donne’s own particular conceits) in a way that sees him using it as the poem’s point of departure and extending it over the course of the entire poem. Roberts deliberately pushes the conceit to exceed its own sense, and if as Eliot writes, ‘a conceit is the extreme limit

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<sup>1</sup> T.S. Eliot, ‘The Metaphysical Poets’ (1921), in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Vincent B. Leitch, 2nd edition (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), pp.961-968 (p. 967)

of the simile and metaphor' then Roberts's poetry in turn is interested in the extreme limit of the conceit itself.<sup>2</sup> It is at the limit of the conceit, and in the failure to touch this limit, that Roberts's poetry comes to be repeatedly characterised by an anti-climactic, Eliotian denouement. In the use of the conceit, the reader encounters Roberts's attempt to 'to find new terms, new metaphors', through a testing exploration of language's limits.<sup>3</sup>

The failure to touch the limit of the conceit finds its echo in the way urban and rural spaces also fail to touch in the 'edgelands', a concept which again engages with the provenance of Roberts's poetry in the writings of Eliot. The 'edgelands' and the limit of the conceit demonstrate the way in which Roberts's poetry reflects Derrida's observation that a degree of noncontact is always a condition of touch.<sup>4</sup> In terms of the limit, Derrida points to the way in which the limit 'does not let itself be touched, and steals away at a touch, which either never attains it or trespasses on it forever'.<sup>5</sup> This observation staged both in the way the limit of the conceit is never explicitly touched on in Roberts's poetry, and in the way the urban and the rural have no definable line drawn between them. Instead, these spaces come to be marked by what Nancy terms exposition — the movement between two edges or two limits as they are brought to touch. Nancy's notion of exposition, in turn, elucidates the mechanics of 'the between' to which Roberts's language of touch

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<sup>2</sup> T.S. Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, ed. by Ronald Schuchard (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 138.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Symmons Roberts, 'Poetry in a Post-Secular Age', *Poetry Review*, 98 (2008), 69-75 (p.71).

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. by Christine Irizarry (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 68.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

repeatedly draws attention, and in the 'edgelands', 'the between' reveals itself to be a dynamic space in which the influence of poetic traditions and genre classifications intersect, but are also resisted.

### **Twenty-first-Century Metaphysical Poetry: At the Limit of the Conceit**

Chapter 1 drew attention to the way in which the word *metaphysical* is used as part of the publicity machine around Roberts's poetry. However, within the context of his poetry, the metaphysical plays on at least three separate registers (the poetic, the philosophical and the religious). The first register, which evokes the Metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century, is the principal focus of the first section in this chapter, although it has been discussed to a degree already in relation to the poetry of Donne and Vaughan. In addition to his publishers, reviewers of Roberts's poetry,<sup>6</sup> as well as online resources related to his work,<sup>7</sup> have extensively used the metaphysical label to describe his writing. In this context, the term denotes an engagement with the metaphysical in its broadest sense of the word: abstract as opposed to concrete, spiritual as opposed to sensual. While it has been argued that there exists an overlap between the metaphysical and the

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<sup>6</sup> Charlotte Higgins, 'Michael Symmons Roberts wins Forward prize', *Guardian*, 1 October 2013, para. 1 of 8; Gerard Smyth, 'Michael Symmons Roberts: a religious poet in the secular age', *Irish Times*, 25 September 2014, para. 1 of 12; Martin Malone, 'Metaphysician, heal thyself.', *The Interpreter's House*, 56 (2014), 116-119 (p. 116).

<sup>7</sup> 'Biography: Michael Symmons Roberts', in *The Poetry Foundation* <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/michael-symmons-roberts>> [accessed: 28 January 2015]; 'Michael Symmons Roberts', in *Poetry International Rotterdam* <<http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/poet/item/21593/29/Michael-Symmons-Roberts>> [accessed: 28 January 2015]; 'Michael Symmons Roberts', in *The Poetry Archive* <<http://www.poetryarchive.org/poet/michael-symmons-roberts>> [accessed: 28 January 2015]; 'Michael Symmons Roberts', in *British Council Literature* <<http://literature.britishcouncil.org/michael-symmons-roberts>> [accessed: 28 January 2015].

Metaphysical (since all Metaphysical poems raise ‘the great metaphysical question of the relation of the spirit and the senses’),<sup>8</sup> I will argue that Roberts’s poetry is not simply Metaphysical in theme, and goes beyond simply sharing an ‘imaginative field’ with Donne.<sup>9</sup> Roberts’s poetry is specifically Metaphysical in both its style, and in the development of seventeenth-century tropes.

Donne’s influence on Roberts’s poetry is wide-ranging. It can be recognised in the poem ‘To John Donne’ (C, 39-40), the use of an epigraph from Donne’s sermon 17 in the poem cycle ‘Quickening’ (RS, 21-23), and the title to the pamphlet *Her Maker’s Maker* (2002), which references a paradox in Donne’s ‘Annunciation’ from *La Corona*. Roberts also makes clear his appreciation of Donne in interviews.<sup>10</sup> Reviewers of Roberts’s work have also frequently made the connection between Roberts and Donne.<sup>11</sup> Unlike the concentrated thematic, epigraphic and titular engagement of the collection *Raising Sparks* with the poetry of Vaughan however, Donne’s influence on Roberts is recognisable much more sporadically across a wider body of Roberts’s work. Similarly, the extensive critical engagement Roberts demonstrates with Jones (again consolidated in the collection *Raising Sparks*) is not matched by the same engagement with Eliot. Roberts’s interactions with Eliot are more focussed and rare, as exemplified by Roberts’s treatment of Eliot’s poem ‘Journey of the Magi’ in the poem ‘Horsemen’ (HH, 18), which Roberts’s describes

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<sup>8</sup> *The Metaphysical Poets*, ed. by Helen Gardner, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. xxx.

<sup>9</sup> Smyth, para. 2 of 12.

<sup>10</sup> Elisa Bray, ‘The 5-Minute Interview: Michael Symmons Roberts’, *The Independent*, 5 October 2005, question 2 of 7.

<sup>11</sup> See Anne Compton, ‘Michael Symmons Roberts: Grounded and Grand’, *Arc Poetry Magazine*, 64 (2010), 74-80 (p. 75); Sameer Rahim, ‘Drysalter, by Michael Symmons Roberts, review’, *Telegraph*, 3 October 2013, para. 3 of 5; Smyth, para. 1 of 12.



as a 'very deliberate piece of intertextuality'.<sup>12</sup> However, the influence of Donne on Roberts's poetry is in itself an indicator of Eliot's influence, as Eliot was a key figure in the early twentieth-century revival of Metaphysical poetry.

Joseph E. Duncan writes that Eliot did not in fact originate the Metaphysical revival. Rather, Eliot 'crystallised' in his writings a development begun in the previous century by which Metaphysical poetry was overcoming a reputation damaged by critics such as Dr. Johnson. Johnson originally coined the term 'metaphysical poets' as a term of abuse.<sup>13</sup> Eliot's position on Donne is notoriously inconsistent,<sup>14</sup> as he dramatically reverses it between the essays 'The Metaphysical Poets' (1921) and the essay 'Donne in our Time' (1931).<sup>15</sup> *The Clark Lectures*, given in between these two publications, essentially chart the course of his reversal in which Eliot's esteem for Donne sinks lower and lower. As such, Eliot's own thoughts on Donne and the conceit are difficult to use as a consistent critical framework, although the ultimate fizzling out of the project that Eliot's work on Donne was part of (a vast project provisionally entitled *The Disintegration of the Intellect*), and the way that 'Donne faded' in Eliot's esteem, is in and of itself Eliotian.<sup>16</sup> It is the same anti-climactic denouement which Roberts develops poetically with regard to his use of the conceit.

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Day, 'In Conversation with Michael Symmons Roberts', *PN Review*, 199 (2011), 52-55 (p. 54).

<sup>13</sup> Joseph E. Duncan, 'The Revival of Metaphysical Poetry, 1872-1912', *PMLA*, 68 (1953), 658-671 (p. 663).

<sup>14</sup> Frank Kermode, 'Disintegration: Review of The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry, by T. S. Eliot', *LRB*, 27 January 1994, p. 13.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Scofield, *T.S. Eliot: The Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 87.

<sup>16</sup> Kermode, p. 15.

One of Eliot's most famous examples of the anti-climactic denouement is the ending of *The Waste Land*, the gradual winding down of the repeated 'Shantih, shantih, shantih', which Roz Kaveney describes as 'the peace of exhaustion'.<sup>17</sup> In addition, there are the final lines of 'Preludes' ('The worlds revolve like ancient women | Gathering fuel in vacant lots')<sup>18</sup> and particularly 'The Hollow Men' ('This is the way the world ends | Not with a bang but a whimper.').<sup>19</sup> This denouement can also be seen in the poem 'Journey of the Magi', when the three kings upon returning from the birth of Christ find themselves to be 'no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation'. Of Christ's place of birth (and metonymically the birth itself), the speaker of the poem says 'it was (you may say) satisfactory'.<sup>20</sup> Day notes how Roberts's ending to 'Horsemen' (a poem of which the poet himself says he 'thought I'd lay on top of Eliot's and let some of the imagery bleed through') echoes Eliot's 'discretion, the un-dramatic revelation'.<sup>21</sup> Roberts's 'Mapping the Genome (II)' ('You are on a mission to discover [...] why mermaids still swim in our dreams.' C, 30) is similarly underscored by the fatality of Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' ('We have lingered in the chambers of the sea | By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown | Till human voices wake us, and we drown'<sup>22</sup>). However, while 'Prufrock' begins in simile, Roberts's 'Mapping the Genome (II)' begins in

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<sup>17</sup> Roz Kaveney, 'TS Eliot's *The Waste Land*: the radical text of a wounded culture', *Guardian*, 17 April 2014, para. 6 of 6.

<sup>18</sup> T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 11.

<sup>19</sup> T.S. Eliot, *T.S. Eliot: Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 70.

<sup>20</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, p. 62.

<sup>21</sup> Day, 'In Conversation', p. 54. The final line of 'Horsemen' reads 'Horses grazing distant flood plains | pause to watch the fires then dip again' (*HH*, 18).

<sup>22</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, p. 8.

conceit, the conclusion of which is a result of pushing that conceit to its point of exhaustion.

The conceit is often used as a defining stylistic element of Metaphysical poetry.<sup>23</sup>

This identification begins with Johnson, who in his *Lives of the Poets* (1779) criticises the Metaphysical use of 'wit', by which 'the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together'.<sup>24</sup> By means of illustration, Johnson famously asks: 'Who but Donne would have thought that a good man is a telescope?'<sup>25</sup> A conceit like this involves the combining of two ideas to generate a new significance. In strikingly Vaughanian language, Gardner describes the conceit as being 'like a spark made by striking two stones together'.<sup>26</sup> However, in this sense alone, the conceit is no different from the definition of metaphor as something 'shifted from its normal use to a context where it evokes new meanings' (*PEPP*, 863). While metaphor is a significant part of the conceit, it is not the whole thing.<sup>27</sup> Crucial to the conceit is a degree of distance, a radical apartness, such as a man and a telescope, which makes the similarities or *discordia concors* as surprising as possible.

It is important to note at this point that as the discourse around the Metaphysical poets has proliferated, and poets have been variously included and fallen from their ranks, so the conceit becomes less of a defining feature for the group as a whole

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<sup>23</sup> See: David Reid, *The Metaphysical Poets* (UK: Longman, 2000), p. 4; Donald Mackenzie, *The Metaphysical Poets: An Introduction to the Variety of Criticism* (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 54; Gardener, p. xxiii.

<sup>24</sup> Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the English Poets: A Selection* (London: Dent, 1975), p. 11.

<sup>25</sup> Johnson, p. 16.

<sup>26</sup> Helen Gardner, *Religion and Literature* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. xiii.

<sup>27</sup> Frances Austin, *The Language of the Metaphysical Poets* (London: Macmillan, 1992), p. 15.

than it is for individual poets such as Donne. As the diversity of the group and their groupings becomes apparent, it is also evident that the conceit might be something different from poet to poet. Frances Austin notes how the conceit develops along its historical trajectory from a puzzle-like device modelled on medieval emblems in Donne to a purer metaphorical use in Vaughan.<sup>28</sup> In this sense, Roberts's own development of the conceit, which is similar but different from that of Donne, is still entirely consistent with the idea of positioning him as a Metaphysical poet.

Johnson's idea of the conceit as being far-fetched engages with the language of distance, and inversely with the language of touch (distance bridged). K.K. Ruthven extensively unpacks the idea of the intrinsically 'far-fetched' nature of the conceit, and establishes the deep roots the term historically strikes in the English imagination. The idea of something being *far fet* (Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy* [1589]) is linked to the deep mistrust of foreign words and loanwords, which have been fetched from afar, and 'far-fet (as a literary term of disparagement) was used originally in connection with protests against the augmentation of the vernacular by loanwords and scholarly coinages'.<sup>29</sup> In this sense, the conceit is always at play with what is foreign to itself. The inherent sense of distance in the conceit may also go some way to explaining why so many of Donne's (and Roberts's) conceits are involved thematically with enormous geographical distances or spatial imagery (and conversely tactile imagery of close proximity), and why

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>29</sup> K.K. Ruthven, *The Conceit* (London: Methuen and Co Ltd, 1969), p. 16.

Roberts's own development of the conceit is so engaged with limits of one type or another.

By specifying spatiality and strangeness as core components of the conceit, it is also possible to include as part of the spatial conceit the Metaphysical feature of miniaturising, that is 'telescoping the large scale into the small' for the way this is based on the alteration of spatial dimensions.<sup>30</sup> Miniaturising is identified by Donald Mackenzie as a separate feature of the Metaphysical style from the conceit. However, the inherently spatial nature of miniaturising draws attention to the fact that miniaturising is often simply a spatial conceit by which two spatial ideas of differing sizes are brought together, such as a woman and a continent in Donne's 'Elegy 19'. As such, 'miniaturising' can be thought of as more of a mode of conceit, rather than its own feature. This is an important clarification to make, as Roberts's poetry engages with several miniaturising conceits, such as the world/orange in 'Something and Nothing' (*DS*, 13) and the world/pelt in 'Pelt' (*C*, 1).

Many of Donne's conceits are drawn from a wide-ranging use of geographical language. Donne's poetry repeatedly takes London as its centre, and Donne himself has been written about specifically in terms of his being a London poet.<sup>31</sup> Geographical place names range far beyond the city though, by which some areas appear to be figured as more foreign than the rest. There is an extensive and repeated listing of place names from the familiar Old World, which correspond to

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<sup>30</sup> Mackenzie, p. 58.

<sup>31</sup> See Barbara Everett, 'Donne: A London Poet', in Barbara Everett, *Poets in their Time: Essays on English Poetry from Donne to Larkin* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1986), pp. 1-31.

places Donne himself visited, such as Germany. Given the various significant military campaigns, which were defining of Donne's time, and of which he had first-hand experience, there is also unsurprisingly a theme of 'foreign conquest' (*JD*, 53). The idea of foreignness, especially the 'foreign country', is used several times (*JD*, 95 and 98). In a different way, notions of expansion, exploration and ultimately exploitation are evidenced by the use of New World and colonial references to the Americas, West Indies and India. As such Donne's most famous spatial conceits are among those most geographically far-fetched.

The sense of geographical exploitation, and the equivocation of material value with the value of personal attributes, is repeated through references to mines, often situated in the colonies (*JD*, 68, 80, and 91). A particularly conspicuous spatial conceit, which repeats itself, although with variant constellations, is the depiction of limbs as the provinces of the body (*JD*, 59 and 188). Geographical language ranges from cartographically abstracted surfaces (*JD*, meridians and parallels 278; poles 289; globe 89) to extra-terrestrial spatial language including meteors and the firmament (*JD*, 58) and of course, the sun. Of these extra-terrestrial images, the most repeated is the notion of the spheres (*JD*, 65, 81, 89 and 138), which are variously figured as the soul (*JD*, 328) or the body (*JD*, 55).

Critical literature develops geographical readings of Donne with discussions about Donne's 'spatial apprehension' to the use of 'geographical metaphor' in his

poetry.<sup>32</sup> This literature establishes how Donne's use of conceits is characterised by the fact that Donne finds himself at a point of transition between two worldviews. Echoing the tension inherent in the far-fetchedness of each individual conceit, Donne's work as a whole is set against a dramatic social tension. Lisa Gorton, in 'John Donne's Use of Space', writes:

Donne's writing shows he was fascinated by new discoveries. He took up the modern idiom of maps and discovery with delight. But he was also deeply attached to the past, and his assumptions about space belonged to an old tradition: a cosmographic rather than cartographic way of imagining space.<sup>33</sup>

Roberts's poetry at the turn of the twenty-first century is also positioned at a point of dramatic global tensions. However, while Donne's world is expanding with increasing new encounters across the globe, the effects of globalisation cause Roberts's world to shrink. In the poem 'Something and Nothing', the speaker holds in their hands a miniaturised world which 'trembles with tidal waves and gunshots, | footsteps on the streets of pinhead cities, | a metronomic churn of births and deaths'. Furthermore, while for Donne the major transition was towards a new cartography, in Roberts's poetry the transition involves the mapping of the human genome.

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<sup>32</sup> For critical reading on Donne and geography see Lisa Gorton, 'John Donne's Use of Space', *Early Modern Literary Studies*, 4.2/ Special Issue 3 (1998); Jeanne Shami, 'John Donne: Geography as Metaphor', in *Geography and Literature: A Meeting of the Disciplines*, ed. by William E. Mallory and Paul Simpson-Housley (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987), pp.161-168; and for a consideration of Donne's geographical vocabulary Austin, pp. 18-19.

<sup>33</sup> Gorton, para. 1 of 26.

There is an extent to which the scientific matter to which Donne and Roberts respond is less significant than their responses. While Gorton argues that 'Donne's poetry plays upon the uncertainties of the time',<sup>34</sup> at times this uncertainty translates into an obvious sense of fragmentation in the poem's subject position. In 'The First Anniversary', Donne writes that the 'new philosophy calls all in doubt'. This is expressed even more dramatically when Donne goes on to write 'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone' (*JD*, 276). In a time when one system of knowledge transitions to another, Donne's subject is often ungrounded. In turn, Eliot's subject is fragmented rather than ungrounded, and in the last lines of *The Waste Land* constitutes itself through 'These fragments I have shored against my ruins'.<sup>35</sup> However, for Roberts, reflecting on Donne over three hundred years later, the fact that the veracity of the science his poetry engages with might be called into doubt is of no consequence, because it is taken for granted that

Science shifts. But even disproven scientific ideas can be profound, and true to elements of human experience in the context of a poem, as John Donne's poems continue to demonstrate.<sup>36</sup>

In Roberts's twenty-first-century poetry, the fact that scientific 'uncertainties' are part of the truth of human experience is a lesson Roberts learns from Donne's poetry, but which Donne writing in the seventeenth century could himself not yet have known. In terms of the use of conceits, Donne's anxiety translates into a

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., para. 9 of 26.

<sup>35</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, p. 39.

<sup>36</sup> Roberts, 'Poetry in a Post-Secular Age', p. 73.



movement, which often goes from simplicity to complexity. As Eliot notes of 'The Relic', while 'the first three lines are perfectly simple' by 'line 5 he [Donne] becomes wholly and characteristically conceited: you find yourself in a tangle of souls and deputy-souls, kings, viceroys and territories'.<sup>37</sup> As I will suggest, Roberts shares the same movement. The difference is that Roberts deliberately pushes the conceit to its limit, and insists on the over-complication of which Eliot is so critical. This is exemplified by Roberts's use of one of Donne's most famous conceits, 'My America', and in several other poems. Although they feature no intertextual exchange with Donne's poetry, they use the conceit in a similar way.

Donne's conceit, in which the image of a woman's body is 'yoked' together with a continent ('O my America, my new found land' *JD*, 125), has received diverse critical responses. Thomas Hester identifies the poem as, among other things, a blasphemous critique of the covetous attention paid by Walter Raleigh to Queen Elizabeth.<sup>38</sup> Scott Manning Stevens in turn considers the 'melding of the erotics of imperialism and discovery with the exposure of the body' in relation to widespread, contemporaneous figurations of the 'naked savage' in the literature of New World contact.<sup>39</sup> Although it is one of Donne's most well-known conceits, the same conceit, in which the body is figured as territory is ubiquitous in Donne's poetry. In 'The Progress of the Soul', it is the body of a whale whose limbs are 'distant as

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<sup>37</sup> Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, p. 124.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Hester, 'Donne's (re)Annunciation of the Virgin(ia Colony) in "Elegy XIX"', *South Central Review*, 4 (1987), 49-64 (p. 61).

<sup>39</sup> Scott Manning Stevens, 'New World Contacts and the Trope of the "Naked Savage"', in *Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture*, ed. by Elizabeth D. Harvey, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), pp.125-140 (p. 131).

provinces' (*JD*, 188). In 'The Funeral', in which 'limbs' are equated to 'provinces' again, the limbs belong to the male speaker, but given in ownership to the female addressee ('these limbs, her provinces', *JD* 59). Most striking is perhaps the echo of the younger 'Jack' Donne's erotic description of the addressee in Elegy 19 ('My mine of precious stones, my empery, | How blessed am I in this discovering thee!') in the chaste praise of Elizabeth Drury in the older 'Dr.' Donne's 'The First Anniversary' ('she whose rich eyes, and breast, | Gilt the West Indies, and perfumed the East'). The key difference between them is that while Jack Donne's Miss America is equated with material wealth, Dr. Donne's Elizabeth Drury bestows her richness onto the world:

Whose having breathed in this world, did bestow  
Spice on those isles, and bade them still smell so,  
And that rich Indy which doth gold inter,  
Is but a single money coined from her (*JD*, 276)

Despite the relatively high cultural currency of the America conceit, when Roberts uses the same conceit, he still affirms the connection to Donne by titling the poem in which he develops it with the dedicatory or salutary 'To John Donne' (*C*, 39-40). In 'To John Donne', Roberts invokes the original poem, seemingly picking up exactly where Donne left off: 'You call her your America—too right'. After this, however, the conceit is taken decidedly in his own direction, describing to his addressee what a twenty-first-century America means: 'Her wilderness, those prairies | have been carved up into real estate, | | ranches ringed with barbed wire, | lights and guns'.

While Donne's America offers all the possibility of discovery, Roberts's America has been parcelled and sold off: 'That new found land is paced out, | sized up, written down as hope | or prophecy, probability or doubt'.

At this point, Roberts begins to push Donne's original conceit into what is effectively a double conceit by which the geographical metaphor operates in reference to the threat of the private ownership of genetic information created by the mapping of the human genome: 'Her charts are held on laptops, | mastered by medics, laid bare'. The poem 'To John Donne' was a commission for an anthology, *Wild Reckoning*, provoked by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. The anthology paired contemporary poets with scientists to collaborate on a poem. Roberts worked with Sir John Sulston, who led the team which first mapped out the human genome, and the two found common ground in a shared concern about genetic patenting, which forms the background to the poem. Roberts writes that 'the gene code in the final stanza is from the BRCA1 gene, [...] a patenting battleground because of its connections with some forms of breast cancer'.<sup>40</sup> While Roberts posits a strong engagement with the ideas of mapping, the body and genomics, Sulston by contrast points out the error in the use of the word mapping, as 'confusingly, people often talk about "mapping" the genome when they mean "sequencing"'.<sup>41</sup> It is clear though that for Roberts, the mapping register and its capacity to create energetic conceits is far too rich a semantic field to give up. This may be in part to do with the

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<sup>40</sup> *Wild Reckoning: An Anthology Provoked by Rachel Carson's Silent Spring*, ed. by John Burnside and Maurice Riordan (London: Calouste Gulbeken Foundation, 2004), p. 248.

<sup>41</sup> John Sulston and Georgina Ferry, *The Common Thread: A Story of Science, Politics, Ethics and the Human Genome* (London: Bantam Press, 2002), p. viii.

way this register, when the conceit is pushed to its furthest point, eventually offers avenues of resistance to the bodily enclosures it identifies in the poem and the BRCA1 gene.

Jennifer Rohn suggests that Roberts's genome poems 'betray an edge of hostility' towards science. She writes that this 'disapproval is made explicit in 'To John Donne,' in which 'the lover finds his mistress has already been violated – by geneticists'. Rohn's most severe condemnation is that not only does Roberts object to patenting, but that 'the poet also seems to object to the act of knowing itself – as if complete description kills the beauty of life'.<sup>42</sup> Rohn's summary reads like an accusation of tub-thumping, and is a curious contradiction to Fiona Sampson's description of the same poet as not being 'concerned with either testing or prescribing limits'.<sup>43</sup> It might be more accurate to say that Roberts's concern with the co-opting of the body leads him not to 'object to the act of knowing itself' as Rohn would have it, but rather to posit different modes of tactile knowing:

Let your hands, and hers, lead us  
in love's mass trespass, let your lips,  
and hers, claim back with whispers

the co-ordinates of bodies: TTA,  
GAG, TGT, CCC, ATC, TGT, (*this is,*  
*yes, a litany*) CTG, GAG, TTG ...

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<sup>42</sup> Jennifer Rohn, 'Rhyme and Reason', in *The Scientist*, 17 August 2007, para. 1 of 1.

<sup>43</sup> Fiona Sampson, *Beyond the Lyric: A Map of Contemporary British Poetry* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2012), p. 153.

In this context, Luft suggests that the litany of genetic code, which concludes the poem, offers a way of reappropriating knowledge from the commercial sphere into the public sphere since 'as a public and participatory form of prayer, the litany counters the act of privatization'. Luft, however, ignores the other mode of knowledge posited in the idea of 'love's mass trespass'. Luft identifies the mass trespass as

an expression that contains a pun on the Christian "Mass," whose central Eucharistic words are "This is my body." The word "trespass" ironically evokes the Lord's Prayer and its real, moral "trespasses," suggesting the absurdity of the charge that speaking about your own body is a violation of someone else's rights. By copying this DNA sequence into a public document, Roberts inaugurates the trespass he envisions.<sup>44</sup>

However, the 'mass trespass' also plays on the very physical, historic event of the mass trespass of Kinder Scout in 1932, an act of civil disobedience whereby walkers physically trespassed onto the open countryside to which they were legally denied access. This sense of physical territoriality is underlined in the poem by the fact that Roberts's speaker incites the reader, first by appealing to their sense of touch ('Let your hands, and hers, lead us | in love's mass trespass') and to cross consensually into each other's physical territory. Genetic patenting, Roberts's suggests, cannot appropriate the knowledge of someone by touch. However, while the evocation of tactile systems of knowledge serves as the limits of genetic knowledge and

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<sup>44</sup> Joanna Luft, 'Roberts's "To John Donne" and Donne's "Elegy 19"', in *The Explicator*, 68 (2010), p. 147.

ownership, it also demarcates the limits of the words of the poem. While words and touch border on the language of touch, they never completely cross into each other. This then also marks the limit of the conceit, which pushed to its full extent, finally dissipates into ellipsis: 'TTA, | GAG, TGT, CCC, ATC, TGT, (*this is, | yes, a litany*) CTG, GAG, TTG ...'.

Another of Roberts's poems, which draws on the relationship between genomes, knowledge, mapping, the body and touch in a strikingly similar way, is 'Mapping the Genome (I)' (RS, 16). Although structured along very similar themes, this poem demonstrates the use of metaphor without spilling into conceit. 'The desire to know' is equated in this poem again with mapping ('to map you to your | bodily soul'). An alternative ('a new epistemology of touch') to empty genomic knowledge ('not some ghost of a ghost- | in-the-machine) is constructed through the language of touch ('the soft consonant of wet lips'). The metaphor is extended through the geographical injunction 'to cross borders' into each other and the geographical epigraph from Elizabeth Bishop's 'The Map'. What stops it from being a conceit is a matter of scale. Tactile mapping of the other is suggested to be an authentic form of knowledge, not just representation:

The sensation of you whispered on my  
fingertips for days, the map in my memory  
for weeks before details fell away.  
Then I wanted to know you again.

Unlike the conceit of 'America' and the woman's body, 'Mapping the Genome (I)' suggests an analogous correlation between the tangible body and the intangible soul: 'The sensation of you whispered on my | fingertips for days'. As such, the scale of the map in the poem 'Mapping the Genome (I)' is 1:1. It is not something to use to find one's way around someone's body with, or to help take territorial ownership of. Rather, the map is an authentic knowledge two people have of each other, generated through mutual exchange of words and touch.

The poem 'Mapping the Genome (II)' in *Corpus* (C, 29-30), a homonymically titled counterpart, however, does make use of the conceit. The conceit is set out in the first line: 'Geneticist as driver, down the gene | codes in, let's say, a topless coupé'. The conceit in this poem involves the 'yoking' together of an American-style highway ('motel', 'parking lot') with a string of genetic code. It is an extended conceit in which the terrain and weather surrounding the genetic highway are mapped out over the course of the poem to reveal, somewhere off the beaten track, 'miles of dead code': 'Somewhere out there are remnants | of our evolution, genes for how | | to fly south, sense a storm, | hunt at night, how to harden | your flesh into scales'. The 'mapping out' in this poem is once again used to negotiate contemporary scientific and alternative forms of knowledge, and Roberts himself sets out the scientific particulars in an article. The section is worth quoting in full, for the way Roberts links science and poetry by speculatively positioning the genetic occurrence he discusses as the source of poetic creativity:

Some recent thinking in genetics attempts to explain the difference between the human genome and that of apparently less developed and intelligent animals. Not only is our genome small in comparison, but various parts of it appear to be inactive in us, but active in other creatures. Shouldn't the most complex and intelligent creatures have the most complex genome? It seems not. And this opens the door to a new story of our evolution as a series of genetic 'switchings off'. If our evolutionary ancestors were rooted to the earth and the seasons by the power of their genetic instincts, then what happens when you no longer have the instinct to build a particular shelter in a particular landscape at a particular time of year? A sudden freedom, mixed with a sense of loss and anxiety? Is this the source of humanity's abiding 'homelessness'? A loss of instinctive connection with the earth? If so, then surely it is also the source of our creativity.<sup>45</sup>

Through the conceit, in which a highway is miniaturised to a sub-cellular level, Roberts links the genetic phenomenon of 'dead code' to the source of poetic creativity, thus re-establishing the body as 'common ground' not just between religion and science, but also poetry and science. The 'yoking' together again involves not only the images in the conceit, but two entire discourses. As to whether or not the gene code has been expanded or the highway has been contracted makes no difference in terms of the use of the word miniaturising. Miniaturising as a conceit will, to a certain extent, always contain its opposite, or as Mackenzie writes of the miniature in Metaphysical poetry: 'It is always ready to open – sometimes not open but explode – into its opposite.'<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Roberts, 'Poetry in a Post-Secular Age', p. 73.

<sup>46</sup> Mackenzie, p. 58.



In terms of pushing the conceit to its limits, the genetic highway is a strong example of the way Roberts pushes, in Eliot's words, 'the elaboration (contrasted with the condensation) of a figure of speech to the furthest stage to which ingenuity can carry it'.<sup>47</sup> The areas of similarity between the highway and the gene code are convincing in terms of their both being linear and drawing on a vocabulary of mapping. Even the 'order of the rocks, the cacti, | roadside weeds' to represent the sense of the code as being something in sequence is still acceptable as part of the conceit's *discordia concors*. However, at times, the poem well exceeds the point of union between the ideas, such as when the speaker describes the following:

Every hour or so, you glimpse a shack  
which passes for a motel here:  
tidy faded rooms with TVs on  
  
for company, the owner pacing out  
his empty parking lot. And after  
each motel you hit a sandstorm  
  
thick as fog, but agony.

This passage seems to push the point of agreement between the ideas beyond sense. While the motels can still be seen as forming part of the code of rocks and cacti, the line is crossed into a productive ambiguity when Roberts engages with a strikingly high degree of attention to particulars with regard to the motel's interiors

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<sup>47</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets', p. 962.

and owners. While these descriptions appear significant, they have nevertheless exhausted the conceit itself. The precise nature of their significance is something experienced, like the agony of a sandstorm, rather than understood, like code. At this point, it is difficult to judge whether or not what Roberts displays is what Eliot would term a 'dissociation of sensibility' in which thought and feeling have been separated, or whether the poet 'clothes the abstract, for a moment, with all the painful delight of flesh', in an act in which sensibility is unified.<sup>48</sup>

The final lines of Roberts's poetry come to serve as a point at which the tensions between scientific knowledge and poetic feeling are also considered in the work of Donne and Eliot. Roberts concludes the poem in an address to the geneticist in his poem, telling them:

You are on a mission to discover  
  
why the human heart still slows  
  
when divers break the surface,  
  
why mermaids still swim in our dreams.

Eliot's poem 'The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock' ends with the famous lines

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea  
  
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown

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<sup>48</sup> Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, p. 55.

Till human voices wake us, and we drown.<sup>49</sup>

Both Roberts and Eliot link the mermaid to sleep and dreams, though while Eliot's Odyssean 'sea-girls' prompt the speaker to move from dream to deadly reality, in Roberts's poem, the mermaids are posited as part of a reality which the scientist must acknowledge despite the apparent incongruity of mermaids and the idea of scientific mission. Denis Donoghue links Eliot's ending to a line in Donne's 'Song', in which he writes as part of 'a list of impossible achievements of knowledge':

Go, and catch a falling star,  
Get with child a mandrake root.  
Tell me, where all past years are,  
Or who cleft the Devil's foot,  
Teach me to hear mermaids singing. (JD, 77)

Donne sets up the 'mermaids singing' as something antithetical or in a different order to empirical knowledge. Eliot similarly aligns the song of the 'sea-girls' with dream as opposed to reality. Roberts in turn challenges scientists to broaden their perspective and accommodate the mermaid's song. Donoghue writes that the difference between Donne and Eliot is the way in which

Donne doesn't ask the mermaid's to sing to him, but Prufrock does. [...] His description of the mermaids is a further claim to distinction, but it exhausts itself in the telling.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, p. 8.

<sup>50</sup> Denis Donoghue, *Words Alone: The Poet T.S. Eliot* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 11.

The note of exhaustion, which Donoghue identifies and which 'Prufrock' ends on, has been identified as a shared quality of Eliot's and Roberts's poetry. The key difference between these two poems in this context is the way in which they arrive at Donne's mermaid trope. According to Donoghue, 'Prufrock' was written in fragments 'put aside till one day a certain loose affiliation among them might suggest a possible poem'.<sup>51</sup> Certainly, the sudden positioning of the speaker on the beach is one of a series of sudden sea changes in the poem, which might be accounted for in this way. By contrast, the route by which Roberts arrives at the image of the mermaid can be traced literally and figuratively (in the geneticist's road) back to the beginning of the poem, where he sets his conceit up in the very first line, only in order to push it to its limit.

Rohn writes that in Roberts's description, the geneticist 'takes the form of a cavalier desecration of nature'.<sup>52</sup> This reading seems to go against both the interested and engaged position Roberts takes in interviews and articles towards the field of genetics. The idea of the code as being 'unravelling as vista' is Metaphysical technique, not 'cavalier desecration'. In fact, as an analogy, the use of this conceit seems to work effectively in what Rohn herself describes as a fruitful meeting point between nature and science, where 'aside from the aesthetic experience it can provide, poetry can make people more aware of scientific issues'.<sup>53</sup> More than that though, the conceit used in this poem, and the extremes to which it is pushed, does

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>52</sup> Rohn, para. 1 of 1.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., para. 1 of 1.

more than simply analogue scientific knowledge. Where the conceit is stretched to its furthest point, the line is crossed not simply from specificity into ambiguity, but from the analogising of knowledge, to the rendering of how that knowledge is experienced. So while genetics might reveal the existence of ‘remnants | of our evolution, genes for how | | to fly south, sense a storm, | hunt at night, how to harden | your flesh into hide of scales’, genetics does not engage as a field with the ‘agony’, loneliness (‘the owner pacing out | his empty parking lot’), confusion (‘a blur to you’), or mystery (‘why mermaids still swim in our dreams’), which accompany this knowledge. As such, Roberts is attempting, on a much larger scale, the unification of sensibility Eliot desires. However, faced with a task of such magnitude, the conceit cannot conclude but in the murky waters of dream, underscored as it is by the Eliotian anti-climax from ‘Prufrock’ and Donne’s positioning of the mermaid outside the realms of knowledge.

While the group of poems ‘Mapping the Genome (I)’, ‘Mapping the Genome (II)’ and ‘To John Donne’ all share a concern related to genetic or tactile knowledge of self, the next two examples share a concern with knowledge of the world. In the poem ‘Something and Nothing (II)’ (*DS*, 13), another homonymically titled poem, the conceit is, as in ‘Mapping the Genome (II)’, posited in the first line and then developed across the rest of the poem:

Then one day the world drops into your hands  
like a bruised fruit, a-buzz with what you take  
for wasps but is in truth all human life.

Unlike 'Mapping the Genome (II)', this poem lacks the element of analogy. Nor is the conceit posited to consolidate an argument towards the middle or the end of the poem. Rather, the conceit falls into place at the beginning of the poem and develops its theme from there. The poem seems to answer the question: what would you see/hear/feel if the world suddenly dropped into your hands?

It trembles with tidal waves and gunshots,  
footsteps on the streets of pinhead cities,  
a metronomic churn of births and deaths.

At night, it sparkles like a pomander  
with billions of headlights, streetlights, fires,  
warms your fingers with its love and anger.

'Something and Nothing', like all one hundred and fifty poems in *Drysalter* is a fifteen-line poem, playing on the idea of the sonnet. Its opening sets out the situation, figuring the miniature world predominantly in the language of touch. The world is in the speaker's hands. It 'trembles' and 'churns', it 'warms your fingers with its love and anger'. The turn occurs after nine lines, which is when the speaker acts on the situation in which they find themselves:

You hide it in a bowl beneath a weight  
of apple, orange, peach, but as they rot

and purse, this orb just ripens, softens, stays.

The world's sick sweetness hooks your throat,  
and all our songs and lamentations coalesce –  
a hornet's nest that will not let you sleep.

After the turn, there is again a sense that the conceit exceeds the union of its two ideas. As the world becomes ever more fruit-like, the conceit is stretched further and further, until something like the speaker's experience of the world even at its full size is arrived at. However, this transition is only achieved by abandoning the conceit at its widest point ('The world's sick sweetness hooks your throat') and spilling into another metaphor ('a hornet's nest that will not let you sleep').

In the poem 'Pelt' the conceit is similarly posited in the first line: 'I found the world's pelt | nailed to the picture-rail | of a box-room in a cheap hotel'. The poem also introduces a certain 'co-identification of world and body',<sup>54</sup> which is a signature of the collection *Corpus* ('So that's why rivers dry to scabs, | that's why the grass weeps every dawn, | that's why the wind feels raw' C, 1). The painfully tactile language of an exposed, skinless body escalates, its nature questioned, until the final line, when 'I tried it on, of course, but no'. A full co-identification does not occur, and the final line in the understated negation is again marked by a certain de-escalation of energy, as if the conceit had reached a natural point of exhaustion in an 'un-dramatic revelation'. The limit of the conceit, in which language is

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<sup>54</sup> Compton, p. 74.

stretched as far as it will go, also once again marks the edge of the poem, the edge where the intangible borders on, but cannot cross into, the tangible. This is the point at which the conceit is not only Metaphysical, but also metaphysical in its concerns. Through his use of the language of touch, Roberts repeatedly arrives at a moment in which poem touches on world, but fails to cross into it. The figure putting on the 'world's pelt' is the figure of the poem itself, at the last instant denied full co-identification with the real, despite its tactile realism ('That pelt was thick as reindeer' *C*, 1).

It is important to note that there are examples in Donne's poetry in which he also begins with the conceit and develops it over the course of the poem. In these instances Eliot writes that he still 'has the better of it'. This approval, however, is only with regard to one verse of 'The Relic', after which Eliot chastises Donne again for losing focus. The co-identification of world and body is similarly a prominent overlap with Roberts's poetry. It is a movement Donne goes on to apply to the speaker himself in the 'Divine Meditations', when Donne writes 'I am a little world made cunningly' (*JD*, 310), and even more extensively in the poem 'Hymn to God in my Sicknesse' (*JD*, 348). Here again is an example in Donne, where the conceit is positioned very early on in the poem, and this time it is truly developed to the point of its exhaustion over the course of the entire poem. This is a notable exception, however, and as Jeanne Shami observes:



it is the self-conscious, deliberate extension of the analogy to the end of the poem that is most unusual. This time, Donne is a map of the world and will wring all the significance he can from himself as a microcosm.<sup>55</sup>

Where Roberts and Eliot so often end in exhaustion, Donne ties up his conceit in this poem in paradox ('Therefore that he may raise the Lord throws down.' *JD*, 348). Although by choosing to end on the downward movement, rather than the upward, Donne's poem allows for certain resonances to be found between all three.

Eliot's increasingly tortured attempts at defining Metaphysical poetry and deciding who is to be included in the ranks of that movement shows how difficult the project is. As Frank Kermode points out, for Eliot, Donne is ultimately superseded by Dante as the Metaphysical poet *par excellence*.<sup>56</sup> However, having posited Roberts as a metaphysical poet of the twenty-first century, it is worth considering the extent to which his poetry is reflective of a wider movement. Critics have noted the use of the conceit, for instance, in the work of Roberts's close collaborator Farley.<sup>57</sup> There is also extensive room to argue that Shapcott belongs to a contemporary 'School of Donne'. Like Donne and Roberts, Shapcott's use of the conceit often involves a geographical language palette combined with the language of touch. In 'In the Bath' for instance, the image of the 'water touching | her all over' underscores the way the submerged and above-surface parts of the speaker's body make a map of her

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<sup>55</sup> Shami, p. 164.

<sup>56</sup> Kermode, p. 1.

<sup>57</sup> Charles I. Armstrong, 'City of Change and Challenge: Liverpool in Paul Farley's Poetry', in *Poetry & Geography: Space & Place in Post-war Poetry*, ed. by Neal Alexander and David Cooper (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), pp.21-32 (p. 6).

'building an island chain of hip bones, | belly, breasts'.<sup>58</sup> Like Roberts, Shapcott identifies herself as a Donne 'fan'<sup>59</sup> and is connected to Donne in particular in terms of the fact that she can be thought of as a London poet.<sup>60</sup> In his critique of *Of Mutability*, Sean O'Brien also makes explicit links between the writing of Shapcott and Donne,<sup>61</sup> and Francis Leviston identifies, in her review of *Of Mutability*, Shapcott's use of the 'intensely metaphysical symbol' of the tear in relation to the body.<sup>62</sup> What might be thought of as Metaphysical conceits are common in Shapcott's poetry. Donne's repeated motif of limbs figured as provinces finds its echo in a 'thigh the length of Florida'.<sup>63</sup> There is an explicit borrowing from Andrew Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress' in the poem title 'Vegetable Love'.<sup>64</sup> The subject of the poem 'His 'n' Hers', who makes the 'byzantine effort to be as all-knowing | as a space telescope', is reminiscent of Donne's own good-man-as-telescope conceit.<sup>65</sup> Finally, as well as using conceits such as the water drop, Shapcott can be found writing in the miniaturising mode, such as when 'my leading toe locates a tiny lake | next to the sink'.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Jo Shapcott, *Her Book: Poems 1988-98* (London, Faber and Faber, 2000), p. 67.

<sup>59</sup> 'John Donne: Poet in the City', St Paul's Cathedral Official YouTube Channel, 12 May 2012 (32 minutes 15 seconds – 45 minutes), 32 minutes 27 seconds.

<sup>60</sup> Shapcott poems set in London: 'Tom and Jerry visit England' (*Her Book*, 39), 'A Walk in the Snow' (*Her Book*, 77), 'The Swallows Move In' (*Her Book*, 89), "'Delectable Creatures'" (*Her Book*, 93), 'My Life Asleep' (*Her Book*, 97), 'Sinfonietta for London' (*Of Mutability*, 18) and 'Gherkin Music' (*Of Mutability*, 19). Jo Shapcott, *Of Mutability* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010).

<sup>61</sup> However, O'Brien is also quick to identify points of divergence between the two, particularly in the way they respectively establish or destabilise centralizing positions. See Sean O'Brien, 'Jo Shapcott: Of Mutability', *Poetry Review*, 202 (2011), 17-22 (p. 19).

<sup>62</sup> Frances Leviston, 'Of Mutability by Jo Shapcott', *Guardian*, 17 July 2010, para. 2 of 6.

<sup>63</sup> Shapcott, *Her Book*, p. 42.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>65</sup> Shapcott, *Of Mutability*, p. 27.

<sup>66</sup> Shapcott, *Her Book*, p. 29.

A final example of a contemporary Metaphysical poet in the School of Donne is Muldoon, who takes the idea of being a Donne 'fan' to another realm altogether. In his introduction to *John Donne*, Muldoon writes that 'John Donne is, for many of us, the greatest English poet',<sup>67</sup> a sentiment that finds expression repeatedly in his critical writing and in his poetry.<sup>68</sup> Muldoon himself both plays down and plays up the connection, saying in an interview of his use of conceits:

Not that I get up in the morning and say, "Let's yoke together by violence heterogeneous ideas," but that's the way the world comes to me.<sup>69</sup>

His use of conceits is evident in the poem 'Good Friday, 1971. Driving Westward', which echoes the title of Donne's poem 'Goodfriday, 1613. Made as I was riding Westward that day'. An example of a Muldoonian conceit in this poem is the description of 'Those children who travel badly as wine'.<sup>70</sup> However, the use of the conceit, while Donnian in the heterogeneity of its ideas, is distinctly different to Roberts's in terms of its position. Once made, it is not pushed to its point of exhaustion, but remains specific to that location in the poem. Muldoon's poem, rather than developing a conceit from beginning to end, instead follows the thematic and geographical direction of Donne's poem, albeit driving instead of riding. In this, the approach is more subtly palimpsestic than Roberts's targeted use

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<sup>67</sup> John Donne, *John Donne*, ed. by Paul Muldoon (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), p. ix.

<sup>68</sup> See also Tara Christie Kinsey, "'Rave on, John Donne": Paul Muldoon and Warren Zevon', *The Yellow Nib*, 8 (2013), 33-51 (pp. 33-51); and Isabel A. Moore, "'Unapproved Road": Poetic Roadblocks and Animal Traffic in Paul Muldoon', *ESC*, 36 (2010), 57-80 (footnote p. 65).

<sup>69</sup> See Dinitia Smith, 'Times Are Difficult, So Why Should The Poetry Be Easy?; Paul Muldoon Continues To Create By Lashing Outlandish Ideas Together', *The New York Times*, 19 November 2002, para. 9 of 14.

<sup>70</sup> Paul Muldoon, *Poems 1968-1998* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 19.

of the 'My America' conceit. Furthermore, Muldoon's poem has at its centre an episode in which the drivers of the car are unsure if they hit something or not. The effects of this moment carry on until the end of the poem. According to my analysis so far, Roberts, by contrast, would have positioned this catalyst at the beginning of the poem and developed it to its point of exhaustion.

When Wheatley describes as 'otiose' Roberts's conceit of a cold drop of water being like a bee sting, it is evocative of Johnson's description of Donne's man-as-microcosm conceit as 'abstruse'.<sup>71</sup> The accusations are of a shared nature in that the image is derided as being difficult, unpractical, and of little use. Given that the term Metaphysical was originally pejorative, however, this shared criticism is perhaps as strong an indication of the Metaphysical quality of Roberts's work as any similarities between his and Donne's poetry. However, where Eliot criticises Donne by saying that 'instead of pursuing the meaning of the idea [...], [Donne] *arrests* it, in order to extract every possible ounce of the emotion suspended in it', Roberts by contrast, follows the idea through deliberately, to its sometimes unsatisfactory conclusion, a denouement which, in turn, he inherits from Eliot.<sup>72</sup>

A certain movement has been identified by which the limit of the conceit is pushed in Roberts's poetry to a natural point of exhaustion. The limit of the conceit is not a line that is recognised, touched on and then crossed, but rather the limit is recognisable in being crossed or in failing to be crossed. In the next section, I

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<sup>71</sup> David Wheatley, 'Messages from the Conflict Zone', *The Guardian*, 11 October 2008, para. 5 of 6.

<sup>72</sup> Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, p. 86.

demonstrate the way in which this liminal quality is also manifested in Roberts's poetry in the notion of edginess, a particularly Robertsonian characteristic, which is revealed as a tactile testing of the limits of the poetic self.

### **Between Spaces: Blurring Edges in 'Edgelands'**

'Edgelands', 'forgotten regions in our midst [...] allotments, railways, motorways, wasteland and water' (*E, DJ*), are a trope which Roberts figures in fiction, non-fiction and poetry. Roberts's concept of 'edgelands' is characterised by a particular sense of its own edginess. If the *OED* defines edginess as being either 'the condition of having the outlines too clearly marked' or as a sense of 'irritability', then the edginess in Roberts's writing demonstrates itself to be a synthesis of the two: an irritation at edges being too clearly marked. This is exemplified in the way his figurations of 'edgelands', environments where the countryside and the city touch, irritably challenge both rural-urban and human-nonhuman binaries, and categories of urban and nature writing.

Roberts's collaboration with Farley on the non-fiction book *Edgelands* (2012) has led to Roberts's prose being read and reviewed under, broadly speaking, eco-critical categories,<sup>73</sup> and frequently alongside the work of Roberts's contemporary, the

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<sup>73</sup> *Prose* in the context of 'edgelands' means Roberts's non-fiction. Roberts's novel *Patrick's Alphabet* (2007) uses the 'edgelands' as its setting too. With its crime-driven plot and the morally ambiguous narrator Perry Scholes at its centre, the novel, more than the non-fiction book, demonstrates a sense of edginess inherent in the poetry. However, to retain focus on Roberts's poetry, this is as far as I will engage with the novel.

poet Kathleen Jamie.<sup>74</sup> Jamie and Roberts are positioned together in this literature for the way both writers problematize categorical binaries and the idea of nature writing itself: Roberts, in the idea of ‘edgelands’, and Jamie, for the way she questions the notion of the ‘wild’.<sup>75</sup> In ‘Listening in the Margins’, McNeilly describes Jamie, Farley and Roberts as poets who ‘inhabit the edgelands, margins and borders where our sense of what it is to be human is both destabilized and remade’. This destabilisation extends in particular, McNeilly writes, to ‘cognitive boundaries and material contact-zones, the liminal spaces that both divide and confound the natural and the artificial, the urban and the rural’.<sup>76</sup> Lilley echoes this position on Jamie, Farley and Roberts when she writes:

Linking these works is an emphasis upon picking out the hidden detail in the everyday, to illuminate what is overlooked and in so doing, to see the interrelationship between the human and the nonhuman differently.<sup>77</sup>

McNeilly frames his own reading in terms of Nancy’s notion of ‘listening’, which he feels these poets’ writings embody to varying degrees. Nancy writes that ‘to be

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<sup>74</sup> See David Wheatley, *Contemporary British Poetry* (London: Palgrave, 2015); Kevin McNeilly, ‘Listening in the Margins: Kathleen Jamie, Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts’, presented at the “Acoustic Communication and Soundscape Design” symposium at Green College, UBC, 16 September 2011 Deborah Lilley, ‘Kathleen Jamie: rethinking the externality and idealisation of nature’, *Green Letters*, 17 (2013); Robert Macfarlane, ‘Edgelands by Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts - review’, *Guardian*, 19 February 2011.

<sup>75</sup> Kathleen Jamie, ‘A Lone Enraptured Male’, *LRB*, 6 March 2008, p. 7.

<sup>76</sup> McNeilly, p. 1.

<sup>77</sup> Lilley, p. 18.

listening is always to be on the edge of meaning'.<sup>78</sup> For McNeilly, this translates into the sense that these poets

don't so much seek out determinable meanings as they aim to inhabit the work of meaning-making itself, an auditory give-and-take from which their compromised and plural senses of self, of voice and voices can emerge.<sup>79</sup>

This indeterminacy and plurality finds itself expressed in Roberts's *Edgelands* in the way that the traditionally liminal crossing-place of sub-urban 'edgelands' are figured as a space which changes and within which change can take place: 'a complex landscape, a debatable zone' (*E*, 6). However, while the prose *Edgelands* is considered to be, or to be challenging to, ecopoetics, figurations of 'edgelands' in Roberts's poetry have not been considered in these terms at all. This is a particularly remarkable evasion in a book such as Wheatley's *Contemporary British Poetry*, which discusses Roberts's 'edgelands' only in reference to his prose.<sup>80</sup> In fact, Wheatley is not alone as a critic in thinking of Roberts's prose as poetry, and Daryl Martin writes:

Criticism that the book lacks narrative drive may be answered if we understand the book as akin to a collection of poetry, where each of the individual chapters is a contained piece gathered together to address particular themes and tropes as a whole – where the

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<sup>78</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. by Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), p. 7.

<sup>79</sup> McNeilly, p. 2.

<sup>80</sup> Wheatley, *Contemporary British Poetry*, p. 149.

connections between individual chapters are partial and possible to recalibrate, in order to tell different stories.<sup>81</sup>

This is an impression that seems to be encouraged by the poets themselves, who write in the introduction that ‘we hope the chapters rhyme’ (*E*, 10). The poets’ (as opposed to the critics’) own genre crossing though can to some extent be explained by the edginess inherent in the title of their book simply being extended to an irritability at the idea of genre limits.

‘Edgelands’ have occurred in some constellations in Roberts’s poetry from his first collection onwards. The setting of ‘Hosea Thomas in the Realm of Miracles’ in *Soft Keys*, for instance, centres around a wasteland between the subject’s house and some railway tracks. (*SK*, 17-23). Other ‘edgelands’, such as the negotiable, wire-fenced territory between the local community and the military base on Greenham Common in *Burning Babylon*, even find their way into the non-fiction *Edgelands* in the chapter ‘Wire’ (*E*, 93-98). One reason why Roberts’s poetry is overlooked in terms of ecopoetic criticism though, is that, unlike the titular centrality ‘edgelands’ takes in prose, they have been mentioned by name in his poetry only once.

Roberts’s poetry’s uneasy relationship with ecopoetics, or at least the foregrounding of nature as the subject of his poetry, is also evidenced by his

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<sup>81</sup> Daryl Martin, ‘Translating Space: the Politics of Ruins, the Remote and Peripheral Places’, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 38 (2014), 1102-1119 (p. 1111).



commission 'To John Donne' for the environmental anthology *Wild Reckoning*.

While the bulk of the commissions for the anthology take as their subject various forms of flora or fauna, or draw on traditional pastoral themes, Roberts instead engages with genetic science.<sup>82</sup> However, what the poetic figurations of 'edgelands' in the poems 'Man in a Fox Suit' (*HH*, 12) and 'Fox in a Man Suit' (*HH*, 13) demonstrate in particular — the latter poem being the only poem of Roberts to feature the word 'edgelands' itself — is that the distinct quality of edginess in Roberts's writing is even more clearly rendered in his poetry than in his prose.

In the book's introduction, the authors of *Edgelands* describe 'edgelands' as 'those places where overspill housing estates break into scrubland, wasteland' (*E*, 5).

Wasteland, in its quotidian sense of 'land in its natural, uncultivated state' (*OED*), is used ubiquitously in the book, and even has a chapter dedicated to the term. If the connection to Eliot's *The Waste Land* is not latently obvious then it is made directly by the authors themselves when they suggest at one point that Eliot's trope is the 'edgelands' in embryonic form by claiming to recognise 'glimpses' of 'edgelands' in *The Waste Land*. They also emphasise their own place on a trajectory from *The Waste Land* to 'edgelands', which begins when 'between the wars, the idea of the wasteland seeped into British art like a brown fog' and the 'disillusion and dereliction in Eliot's poem, [...] seemed to find its broken images reflected in the work of many artists and writers' (*E*, 148). However, while *The Waste Land* and its broken images comes to be known principally for its sense of fragmentation, the

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<sup>82</sup> Other exceptions include Linda Gregson, Paul Muldoon and Christopher Reid.

*Edgelands* authors want the 'edgelands' to be known for their edginess: 'if you know these underdeveloped, unwatched territories, you know that they have "edge"' (E, 5). The authors take great pains to introduce this new territory as something which is not too clearly defined, leading to sometimes paradoxical descriptions. In their research, for instance, Farley and Roberts found that these new territories 'often contained decay and stasis, but could also be dynamic and deeply mysterious. Edgelands are always on the move'. *Edgelands* frequently finds itself conflicted between a language of ambiguity and certainty, such as when the authors describe 'edgelands' as being as 'difficult to pin down and define as poetry, but like poetry, you'd know it when you saw it' (E, 7).

However, what is described in the introduction in terms of the 'debatable' quality of 'edgelands' is not ultimately borne out by the rest of the prose. Rather than being irritated by edges too clearly defined, the authors find themselves drawing lines and creating edges instead. *The Waste Land*-'edgelands' connection is severed by Farley and Roberts when they identify Eliot as 'a poet of the city, albeit the "unreal city", rather than the edgelands' (E, 147). The emphatic positioning of Eliot behind territorial lines, drawn between 'edgelands' and city, compounds a sense in which Roberts and Farley are staking out a literary and territorial claim.

In *Edgelands*, the act of naming involves a competitive sense of this claim being disputed and debate being settled, rather than engaging with the term's 'debatable' quality. The authors write that 'we *might* have come up with it ourselves, but

geographer Marion Shoard got there first'. Shoard's coining of the term is incorporated in the authors' introduction as a 'call to arms, for poets and novelists to celebrate them ['edgelands']'.<sup>83</sup> This celebration places particular emphasis on the name ('above all her *naming* of this ground was the starting point for us'), which in an ecocritical context draws a line to Adam's act of naming the animals in Genesis, which seals man's dominion over nature.<sup>84</sup> In this sense, the naming of the 'edgelands', is also an act of claiming territories that were so far undiscovered, or overlooked and which 'have remained largely invisible to most of us' (*E*, 5). The prose underpinned by this sense of taking ownership and marking its edges out clearly ultimately fails to display what one could call edginess. Wheatley describes the book as 'warmly nostalgic' and notes that it is engaged in a process of 'naturalisation' (as opposed to a more edgy process of 'estrangement').<sup>85</sup> John Burnside similarly finds himself comforted by the book's 'wholesome, deeply English melancholy'.<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, Robert Macfarlane, in his review of *Edgelands*, accuses the authors of 'an inverted blitheness that can beset traditionally romantic nature writing'. Of a description of container yards in particular, which borders on the sublime (*E*, 49), Macfarlane feels the need to remind the reader that container yards 'are also places of crushed fingers and low wages'.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Marion Shoard, 'Edgelands', in *Remaking the Landscape*, ed. by Jennifer Jenkins (London: Profile Books, 2002), pp. 117-146.

<sup>84</sup> Lynn White Jr., 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis', in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), pp. 3-14 (p. 9).

<sup>85</sup> Wheatley, *Contemporary British Poetry*, p. 149.

<sup>86</sup> John Burnside, 'Where the Wild Things Are', *The Times*, 5 February 2011, para. 6 of 12.

<sup>87</sup> Macfarlane, 'Edgelands', para. 8 of 10.

The link to Adam's act of naming and the sense of romanticisation identified by Wheatley, Burnside and Macfarlane connects *Edgelands* to a particularly central patriarchal tradition in nature writing. This is a tradition taken to task in Jamie's review of Macfarlane's *Wild Places*, 'A Lone Enraptured Male'. Jamie's criticism largely centres on the fact that the lone, male *I* seems to necessitate a depopulation of the environment in order to poetically conquer it.<sup>88</sup> There is an extent to which Farley and Roberts are able to avoid some of the accusations levelled at MacFarlane by Jamie. They are two authors, so they are not 'lone'. However, they are male, and, in their duality, they still make a link to a patriarchal tradition, which includes the double-authorship project of Wordsworth and Coleridge. Wordsworth in particular is exemplary of the lone, male *I* in nature writing. Roberts and Farley also make a concerted effort to talk to people they encounter, introducing a range of voices to their book. However, Macfarlane again perceives this to be not particularly successful when he writes that encounters with the people who live in the 'edgelands' are 'uncomfortable' and 'patronis[ing]'.<sup>89</sup> If the question of whether a piece of writing demonstrates edginess or not is raised in part through the treatment of the subject position, the speaker's position in *Edgelands* demonstrates a largely patriarchal, lyric provenance, what Helen Kidd calls 'the great male writing "I"'.<sup>90</sup> Despite various efforts to position the 'edgelands' as edgy, the ubiquity and central position of the speaker in *Edgelands* de-marginalises the territories. By

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<sup>88</sup> Jamie, p. 3.

<sup>89</sup> Macfarlane, 'Edgelands', para. 8 of 10. Macfarlane closes himself off to criticism of alternative opinions, as Jamie points out, by simply leaving living people out of the picture altogether. (Jamie, p. 5.)

<sup>90</sup> As cited in Vicki Bertram, *Gendering Poetry: Contemporary Women and Men Poets* (London: Pandora, 2005), p. 42.

contrast, the poetic figurations of 'edgelands' in Roberts's poetry demonstrate a clearer sense of edginess because they destabilise the lyric / in its central subject position.

The poem 'Fox in a Man Suit' is the only one of Roberts's poems to use the word 'edgelands'. The word takes up a paradoxically central position at the end of the twelfth line of a twenty-two line poem. As the title suggests, the poem plays with ideas of human and nonhuman binaries. This is echoed in the poem by female-male binaries (the titular fox is a vixen), urban-rural binaries as figured by the 'edgelands' themselves, and the binary of the body and the ('fox-') soul. The poem opens with a description of the world at its *soirée*, a homosocial environment in which the disguised vixen ('Masked, gloved, brush tucked flat | against her back') attends to 'talk of defence' and 'the public purse'. The poem charts the transition from one point in the binary to the other. The human, male, urban world is left behind by the nonhuman, female interlocutor, an 'Emissary from the wild woods, agent | from the other side'. The transition is mirrored in the movement from hot (the vixen is 'faint with heat' at the *soirée*) to cold ('Tongue drinks in the cold'). Connotations of the word *heat* related to notions of fertility also mark a shift from the physical-corporeal world to the spiritual ('fox-soul'). It is also a transition from inside to outside, from concealment to revelation.

A sense of irritability is suggested as early as the third couplet. As the vixen 'shakes her head | | at wine, at canapés, she gags on human | stench, their meat and

sweat'. The reaction is so strong, and so specifically rooted in the body, that rather than edginess, this is much more like the Kristevan notion of abjection. Kristeva describes 'food loathing' as 'the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection'. In fact, to illustrate her term, Kristeva draws on a combination of food- and skin-related imagery, when she writes:

When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk — harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring — I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire.<sup>91</sup>

The overlaps between the vixen's transformation and Kristeva's description include the words *gag* and the reference to sweat or perspiration. However, abjection is not exactly edginess, which is the irritability at having lines too clearly marked, but rather the opposite: a revulsion at having lines blurred. In its wider sense, Kristevan abjection is an ambivalent motion by which 'I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish *myself*'.<sup>92</sup> The boundaries of the self are constituted in the abjection of what the subject identifies as other to itself: food, vomit, waste, corpses. The abjection of corpses will be considered in more detail in Chapter 3.

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<sup>91</sup> Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 2-3.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

In the next lines of the poem 'she slips through kitchens, | drops to all fours (still in black tie), | | sprints along the back street | like a feral duke'. The image of the suited man on all fours is the first real blurring of human and nonhuman, as opposed to the poem so far in which one has been concealed inside the other. The key transition occurs when the vixen finally 'meets the edgelands | | where – rubbed on the shuck of a tree – | her man-skin peels off | | like a calyx'. In the tactile shedding of the skin, two spaces, rural and urban, and by extension all points of the various binaries that the poem sets up, come to touch. The abjection of the human skin is not simply a movement from human to nonhuman, but is also an animalistic boundary-marking exercise. In this sense, it is again resonant of abjection, both in the way Kristeva mentions the skin in her analogy of the 'skin on the surface of milk', and the way that as an act it enforces boundaries. Once again, in Roberts's writing, it seems edges are being defined, and lines are being drawn. However, in the previous chapter it has already been illustrated that Roberts's poetry sets up clear, binary correlatives between the physical and the metaphysical, in order to exploit the space in between — the margin or limit that both separates and joins them. This is substantiated in the way that the line drawn in the 'edgelands' poem 'Fox in a Man Suit' does not correspond to any actual line of poetry. Instead, the transformation occurs across and between several lines. The first tipping point is between lines twelve and thirteen after the word 'edgelands', and the second between lines fourteen and fifteen when 'her man-skin peels off | | like a calyx and the sleek red flower unfurls'. The exact point of transformation is impossible to identify. The boundaries remain inappropriable, resonating with the

idea of the limit of the conceit in the first half of this chapter, which is recognisable only in having been crossed, but which cannot be isolated or directly touched upon.

However, by line sixteen the transformation is complete and the vixen's 'Tongue drinks in the cold, | | nose down in leaf mould, deep rush and tow | of attachment, of instinct'. The 'shuck of a tree' and the 'leaf mould' are the only details given of the physical attributes of the 'edgelands' in this poem, although they chime with the broader theme of transformation in their evocation of natural decomposition. All senses of irritability are gone, replaced by the sense of belonging ('attachment'). It is at this point that the lyric *I* reveals itself: 'I, the only witness, | | take this for a resurrection (body sloughed | and after-life as fox-soul)'. The fox-in-a-man-suit configuration is replaced by the vixen, who is in turn being watched by a ubiquitous, male, lyric *I*. However, while the first-person narrator in *Edgelands* seems to find a sense of belonging in the 'edgelands',<sup>93</sup> in 'Fox in a Man Suit', the 'rush and tow | of attachment' is denied the speaker. When Roberts writes 'I watch | | in awe and slow my breath until', the line break is pregnant with the promise of a sublime Romantic experience of making contact with something beyond oneself. The contact, however, paralleling the un-dramatic revelations of Roberts's conceits, is one of being turned away: 'she catches sight and howls and howls'. What is provoked is a movement from wonder ('I watch | in awe and slow my breath') to anger ('she catches sight and howls and howls'), exposing the sense of irritability

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<sup>93</sup> See for instance the nostalgic, childhood reminiscence on den-building (*E*, p. 40).



(‘the quality or state of being easily annoyed or excited to anger or impatience’, *OED*) constantly underpinning the poem.

The partner poem of ‘Fox in a Man Suit’, ‘Man in a Fox Suit’, begins with the fox struggling through the woods, its ‘Thin red hide, flea-ridden, caked | in mud and cack, thorn-snagged’. This time the fox is being pursued, through the ‘edgelands’, ‘in terror of the true dogs | tearing him to pieces’. The fox changes into a man, to enter a house where, despite the safety offered by the ‘warm | white bed’, he is still pursued by ‘dry staccato barks’. The transitions run counter to those of ‘Fox in a Man Suit’: fox to man, outside to inside, cold to warm. In this poem, ‘edgelands’ are also not mentioned by name, but particularly as the poem is a reconfiguration of the previous one, the ‘edgelands’ are recognisable in the landscape itself: from the ‘skeletons of trees’ to the decomposing ‘carrion’. The idea of a ‘debatable zone’ is particularly conspicuous in the word ‘brackish’ (‘spoilt by mixture’, *OED*), but above all in the fact that the poem is set at ‘dawn’. If the ‘edgelands’ is the blurred space where two points in a binary touch, then the crepuscular half-light of dawn and dusk is the natural condition of ‘edgelands’. *Edgelands*, too, notably concludes with a paragraph in which the authors wait for a flock of starlings to act out its murmurations, ‘flexing and trawling through the dusk’ (*E*, 246). Nancy also makes the link between dawn and edge, writing:

The dawn is just: it stretches equally from one edge to another. Its half-tone is not a chiaroscuro of contrasts or contradiction. It's a complicity of places to be opened up and extended.<sup>94</sup>

Nancy's sense of 'finitude' casts illustrative light on what is at stake here. The notion of the dawn in Nancy's philosophy is underscored by the same notion of 'finitude', which informs the idea of 'listening' used by McNeilly to frame his idea of 'listening in the margins'. It also informs Nancy's notion of 'touch' and resonates with the way edginess works in Roberts's poetry. Marie-Eve Morin writes that, for Nancy:

Finitude is not a limitation imposed on a being by the fact that there happen to be other things outside of it and which press upon it. Rather, finitude consists in the fact that any being must be exposed to an outside in order to exist or be what it is.<sup>95</sup>

According to Nancy, a degree of impenetrability must exist between outside and in, for them to touch and constitute each other ('Nothing gets through, which is why it touches.'<sup>96</sup>). In this sense, Nancy's thought touches very closely on ideas expressed in Roberts's poetry, such as when he writes that, 'Skin is border country. | Ever exiled from each other, | we come here to meet' (C, 41). However, Nancy's description of the dawn also demonstrates the way in which his thinking relies on

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<sup>94</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. by Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 127.

<sup>95</sup> Marie-Eve Morin, *Jean-Luc Nancy* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity, 2012), p. 31.

<sup>96</sup> Nancy, *Corpus*, p. 11.

binaries as well as questioning them. Rather than represent an absolute impenetrability, the edge is really a point of exposition, where the subject is 'opened up' to the world. In terms of touch, this finds itself, for instance, reflected in Nancy's expression *expeausition*, which translates as skin-show, and combines the notion of exposition (opening up) with the limits that allow physical touch to occur (the skin).<sup>97</sup> In 'Man in a Fox Suit', *expeausition* and Roberts's sense of irritability are figured together in the 'flea-ridden hide' and the 'neck ricked and panic rising'. The subject's sense of edginess comes from being one part of a binary pitched against the other — lines too clearly drawn. The fox/man is 'At odds | with the wild, this double-double spy'. Similarly, the lyric / in the poem goes unrecognised, but Roberts concludes the poem by describing the fox/man in bed, and leaves him trapped in his own nightmare still being chased. On the one hand, the poems 'Man in a Fox Suit' and 'Fox in a Man Suit' stage the 'chiaroscuro of contrasts or contradiction', which Nancy's dawn repudiates, by variously figuring man-woman, urban-rural, human-animal binaries. On the other hand, if one follows the full movement of the poem, these binaries are always reversed, contradicted and blurred. The 'edgelands', like the dawn, which 'stretches equally from one edge to another', from the edge of the city to the edge of countryside, is not so much a space as a movement: a constant process of exposure to the limit and limits, an opening up.

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

In this sense, the 'edgelands' do not really represent any kind of edge at all. Nancy again offers a useful way of thinking about this, when he consider the Roman *limes*:

The Latin *limes* designates first of all the path that passes alongside a domain. One side of the path belongs to the *dominium*, the other belongs to another, or the public *dominium*, or else to a *no man's land* that escapes all *imperium*. The path itself is the limit – or rather, the limit is in turn the ungraspable, median line of the path or else this latter in the span of its width.<sup>98</sup>

It is impossible for Nancy to find the exact point at which the two spaces are made to touch, what he tactilely terms 'the ungraspable, median line of the path'. Instead, the areas are spaced out, and their touch is really the exposure of 'their mutual exteriority and the circulation between them'. This exposure of 'mutual exteriority' is the 'edgelands', and rather than being figured as a fixed territory as in the prose, in the poems they have been much more strongly figured as a movement between two states.

In this sense, Nancy's model of the exposure of two exteriorities offers a different reading of the poem 'Fox in a Man Suit'. In response to their meeting, the vixen 'catches sight and howls and howls' at the lyric *I*. This was originally interpreted as her irritation. Perhaps, though, the reader is actually left with the irritability of the lyric *I* at being denied a share in this other world, at having the line drawn too definitely. It is at this point where the male, urban, human subject grows aware of

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<sup>98</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Banks, Edges, Limits (of singularity)', *Angelaki*, 9 (2004), 41-53 (p. 46).

having a skin or border at all, and of having this exposed to itself. The edges of the 'self' are left flickering irritably on the horizon. The shape shifter crosses from one state to the other. The lyric *I*, however, which is the real subject of interrogation of the poem, does not transform so completely. Rather, in touching its limits, it is 'opened up' and exposed to them, and then remains at this limit irritably exposed. The same, however, may be said of the reader. The reader is exposed to the poem, the exteriority of the page, but can never cross into it, and as such is denied a certain share in that world. In a Nancyan sense at least, a text has no interiority to cross into, and can only offer its surface. As Nancy writes, 'Writing touches upon bodies *along the absolute limit* separating the sense of the one from the skin and nerves of the other. Nothing *gets through*, which is why it touches'.<sup>99</sup> The howling of the vixen then may finally be also understood as a reflection of the readers' own irritability at their being touched by the text and not being touched by the text, yet at the same time being exposed to 'the circulation between them'. In *Edgelands*, by laying claim to 'edgelands' as a territory, movement is arrested. What happens is that the 'ungraspable' edge is shifted outward, and a new boundary is created between 'edgelands' and countryside, or 'edgelands' and city. As Charles Armstrong points out in a discussion of Farley's poetry, 'the edgelands have edges of their own', which means that this process could go on irritably *ad infinitum*, or more appropriately *ad nauseam*, as writers lay claim to increasingly edgier spaces.<sup>100</sup> This chapter section has demonstrated instead, that the 'edgelands' work best not when they stake their claim as a new territory, but when they present themselves as an

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<sup>99</sup> Nancy, *Corpus*, p. 11.

<sup>100</sup> Armstrong, p. 31.

encounter of geographical, gendered, socially-charged spaces, and in particular as the movement between these spaces.

The way in which edginess emphasises both movement and resistance in the contact between spaces, makes the 'edgelands' in Roberts's poetry reflective of the broader principals of touch at work in his poetry as a whole. The scrutiny of the point of contact in the context of the limit of the conceit, which always steals away, or is only ever identified in being crossed without ever being precisely touched on, demonstrates a similar movement by which touch both does and does not occur, and by which touch is always invited but also denied. The next chapter builds on the framework established in Chapter 1, which considered the components of the binaries which Roberts stages, in addition to the mechanics of their contact identified in Chapter 2. By continuing to create different combinations of the touchable and untouchable, the movement inherent in Roberts's poetry comes to bear on a series of four particular discourses in contemporary poetry, and begins to consolidate the critical implications of the poetics of touch in his work as a whole. The analysis of the language of touch draws increasing attention to the way in which Roberts's poetry is consistently underpinned by, occurs in or comes to constitute 'the between'.

### CHAPTER 3: 'HOW TO TOUCH UPON THE UNTOUCHABLE' — FOUR CASE STUDIES

The previous two chapters have demonstrated the way in which Roberts's poetry insists on the staging of binaries of the touchable and the untouchable. These binaries are performed repeatedly and often contradictorily throughout Roberts's poetry, so that a certain movement is generated between them. The examples of this in Chapter 1 were the spark and the shell, the ghost and the machine and the body and the soul. Repetitions and contradictions included the way in which, for instance, the body is sometimes figured as containing the soul, while at other times the body is contained by the soul. The staging of these various constellations, I suggested, reflects the experience of the contemporary lyric subject as incorporating a range of positions (from Cartesian to materialist), without ever assuming a single one absolutely. Furthermore, Roberts's poetry particularly emphasizes the way in which all constellations collapse and constantly need to be reprised.

This movement from one binary to another is reflected in the attention in Roberts's poetry on the movement between the two points within a single binary itself. In Chapter 2, this latter movement was examined more closely, and identified as being characterised by the failure of the two points in a binary to touch fully upon each other. Binary components demonstrated the lack of a clear dividing line between them, and the failure to touch upon any kind of organising limit. The two examples used in this case were the limit of the conceit and the concept of the 'edgelands'. The limit of the conceit was recognisable for the fact that it was only ever exceeded

and exhausted in Roberts's poems, but never touched upon. In this sense, the limit was identifiable only in having been crossed. The 'edgelands' were in turn explored for the way they marked the line drawn between urban and rural spaces in Robert's writings. Here again, it was impossible to isolate the precise moment or point of contact, and the 'edgelands' showed a marked resistance to being defined as a physical space. Instead, the between-space represented by both the limit of the conceit and the 'edgelands', proved itself to be, not simply a space which allows movement to occur, but a movement in itself.

Having scrutinised various types of binaries (Chapter 1), and the mechanics of their contact (Chapter 2), the final chapter will consider four examples of 'touching the untouchable' in Roberts's poetry: 'voice-prints', caring, contamination and 'metaxu'. These four examples have been chosen for the way in which they can be analysed according to the mechanics of touch established in this thesis so far, and how they develop these mechanics in their own particular way. Furthermore, each example demonstrates a particular intersection with other discourses in contemporary poetry criticism, expanding on these in turn.

The first example, 'voice-prints', considers the way in which Roberts figures the attempted contact between victims of 9/11 and their relatives through the medium of the answerphone message. The untouchable quality of the messages' recipients is affected in its most basic sense through distance between speaker and addressee, and the deferral caused by the intervening medium of the



answerphone. In this sense, the subject of the poem reflects the mechanics of the poem itself as a kind of answerphone message. The poem, by way of its personal address and public availability, furthermore, becomes a site in which public and personal spaces perform another kind of contact, and in this way the discussion becomes involved with contemporary discourse around lyric address as well as the discourse around the 9/11 poem.

In the analysis of caring, Roberts's poetry is considered for the way it stages physical contact between the living and the dead. The dead are untouchable both in the sense of representing a taboo as well as through the fact that they are simultaneously present and departed. Furthermore, recent discourse around contemporary elegy and the corpse poem demonstrates the way in which societal shifts in regards to the dead in Western culture have rendered the corpse increasingly removed from tactile care by those closest to the deceased person. In Roberts's poetry, the corpse demands to be touched, and the corpse poem attempts to meet this demand through its heavy tactile figurations.

The section on contamination revolves around the prohibition against touch, underscored by the fear of radioactive contamination, which fuelled tensions on Greenham Common between local residents, protestors and the US military, when nuclear missile were stored there during the Cold War. Radioactive touch both bears out and subverts the mechanics of touch set out in this thesis so far, in the way in which traditional physical surfaces which function as the site of touch are

undermined. This, in turn, is reflected in the textual contamination that takes place in the book, as well as the way in which Roberts's poetry challenges traditional Cold War poetics and tropes.

The final section is concerned with the influence of Weil on Roberts's writing.

Roberts is one of a number of contemporary poets who engage with Weil's thinking, and in response to whose work a corresponding critical discourse has grown. Roberts draws in particular on the Weilean notion of 'metaxu' to inform the mechanics of touch in his work. In Weil's writing, 'metaxu' is a means by which to consider the idea of making contact with God; however, Roberts's emphasis on the notion of 'metaxu' in his poetry, positions the poem itself as a 'metaxu'.

One further example of touching the untouchable that has been left out here, is the notion of quickening. As a word, *quicken* forms part of Roberts's connection to the Metaphysical poets, in particular Vaughan.<sup>1</sup> In both its sense of the mother's experience of the first foetal movement, and the religious sense of internally experiencing the touch of God, quickening also corresponds very much to the sense of touching on the untouchable established in Roberts's poetry. Like the notion of contamination, the strong sense of internality inherent in the notion of quickening, particularly in the poem 'Quicken' (*RS*, pp. 21-24), challenges the consistent emphasis on the integrity of exterior surfaces, limits and edges in Roberts's work. However, quickening has been omitted from this thesis for the fact that, unlike the

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance the poem 'Quickness'. Henry Vaughan, *Henry Vaughan: Selected Poems*, ed. Anne Cluysennar, (London: SPCK, 2004), p. 161.

other examples, it does not contribute in any clear sense to existing discussions in contemporary critical discourse on similar issues. Each of the sections included here, considers a way in which the untouchable is touched upon, whether it is contact with the deceased through recorded messages, the physical care of corpses, the initially imperceptible touch of nuclear contamination, or the use of the physical world as a means through which to touch on the divine. At the same time, they each contribute to related areas of critical discourse in contemporary poetry. Furthermore, the picture built up between all four examples ultimately allows a final conclusion to be drawn in regard to the nature of the contribution of Roberts's poetry to contemporary poetry discourse, the particular quality of his contemporary metaphysical poetry, and what areas for further research begin to suggest themselves.

### **'Voice-prints': Lyric Touch in 'Last Words' (2002)**

This chapter section will consider the notion of lyric touch in Roberts's poem sequence 'Last Words'. 'Last Words' was commissioned by BBC Radio 4 to commemorate the one-year anniversary of the attacks on 9/11. Particular thought will be given in this section to Roberts's figurations of answerphone messages left by the victims for their relatives and loved ones.<sup>2</sup> Like many examples of lyric poetry addressed from an *I* to a *you*, Roberts exploits the quality of the *you* to appeal simultaneously to the singular and the plural, the personal and the public, and for

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<sup>2</sup> For fictional figurations of the same trope see Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005).

the way *you* can be directed at someone in the poem as well as ambiguously at the reader or a person outside the text. In these poems, the reader is often positioned as the observer to the *I-to-you* exchange. In a poem occasioned for a public or social occasion as an act of commemoration or celebration (*PEPP*, 966), a certain tension is affected by the fact that the personal tone of the contemporary lyric poem is often contrasted with the fact that it is commissioned for a public readership.<sup>3</sup> However, more than simply remaining a private moment which is, in John Stuart Mill's well-known term, 'overheard',<sup>4</sup> Roberts reinforces the integrity of the personal sphere of the poem against its public readership through the use of the language of touch. I will argue that touch actively resists the Millsian notion of being listened in on. While other commissions for British public broadcast commissioned on the same occasion exhibit an invasion of the personal sphere (such as Simon Armitage's 'Out of the Blue'), Roberts's poem sequence demonstrates a marked emphasis on reasserting the integrity of its boundaries. In the section's final part, I will specify the way that 9/11 as an occasion problematizes notions of lyric address and lyric touch.

The study of lyric address has demonstrated a decided shift in emphasis in the twenty-first century. Two important studies have recently emerged on this subject: Waters's *Poetry's Touch: On Lyric Address* and Natalie Pollard's *Speaking to You: Contemporary Poetry and Public Address*. To varying degrees, both studies develop

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<sup>3</sup> See Marian Zwerling Sugano, *The Poetics of the Occasion: Mallarmé and the Poetry of Circumstance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), pp. 4-5.

<sup>4</sup> John Stuart Mill, 'Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties', extracted from *Dissertations and Discussion: Political, Philosophical and Historical V1* ([n.p.]: Kessinger Publishing, [1833?]), p. 71.

a similar line of argument by which a traditional, critical focus on the lyric *I* comes to shift its attention onto the lyric *you*. Both studies trace a line of criticism from Mill's poem as 'overheard', through Eliot's 'The Three Voices of Poetry' (1953),<sup>5</sup> to Jonathan Culler's notion of *apostrophe*, a notion which continues 'to imply that a poet turns his back not just on his listeners but also on any differentiation between the entities he addresses (listening or not)'.<sup>6</sup> Waters's and Pollard's cultivation of the lyric *you* as actively engaged with and demanding engagement from the full range of addressees the *you* implicates, finds itself contextualised by a growing critical interest in the relationship between contemporary poetry and the public. Relevant publications which demonstrate this interest include John Redmond's *Poetry and Privacy*, and *Poetry as Testimony: Witnessing and Memory in Twentieth-Century Poems* by Antony Rowland. Rowland's first chapter deals extensively with lyric address and, like Pollard and Waters, Rowland draws particular attention to the use of the *you*. In addition, his last chapter is concerned with the poetry and the events of 9/11. These two chapters together will provide a useful structure through which to consider lyric address in 'Last Words'.

Waters' relevance to this thesis is established not least because he creates a link between the idea of lyric address and the sense of touch. Waters writes that 'we as readers may feel in second-person poems, in a poem's touch, an intimation of why poetry is valuable'.<sup>7</sup> The idea of poetry as touch is further developed by other

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<sup>5</sup> T.S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), pp. 89-102.

<sup>6</sup> William Waters, *Poetry's Touch: On Lyric Address* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

contemporary critics such as Jackson and Maclachlan, whose particular interest resides in the idea of poetry's capacity to touch across distances. However, when Waters equates contact with touch, he does so without ever scrutinising the language of touch at work in the poem itself, so that touch largely becomes a critical metaphor, which operates in the critical register alone. In this thesis by contrast, the idea of poetic contact is intimately bound up with the close reading of the language of touch in Roberts's poetry itself.

Central to Waters's thesis is the power of the lyric *you*'s ambiguity and the way 'the summons of unspecified *you* restlessly tugs at us, begging identification'.<sup>8</sup> Pollard's attention too is based on the way the poem's touch both 'speaks to *you*, and misses *you*, at the same time'.<sup>9</sup> Pollard considers the way in which a degree of 'trespass' is invited by the lyric poem's capacity to be overheard and exist in two spaces at once, 'personal and public'. 'Through these double voicings,' writes Pollard, 'the lyric participates in a world of overlapping social relations'.<sup>10</sup> While Waters's poem choices are eclectic and, by his own admission, to a degree 'arbitrary', Pollard's are much more focussed on poets of the contemporary age, beginning with C.H. Sisson and ending with Don Paterson.<sup>11</sup> As such, her analysis of the lyric address is instigated by the poetry of these specific poets (Paterson's chapter for instance is on what might be thought of as trade relations with the *you*, a discussion that originates in Paterson's choice of language). The following reading of the poetry of

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> Natalie Pollard, *Speaking to You: Contemporary Poetry and Public Address* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Waters, p. 16.

Roberts follows on from this approach, and as Pollard does not consider Roberts or the post-9/11 poem, it necessarily treads new ground. In turn, the following reading develops Waters's notion of poetic touch, by bringing his critical tactile language and his titular notion of 'poetry's touch' closer in line with the language of touch in Roberts's poetry.

At this point, it is important to define lyric touch, a term which Waters himself does not use, but which combines his titular notion of 'the poem's touch' with his discussion of lyric address. In the context of Roberts's lyric poetry, the idea of lyric touch takes on a very specific meaning. Previous chapters of this thesis have already demonstrated key aspects of the mechanics of a Robertsonian understanding of touch. These include the way that, in the words of Nancy, touch between two bodies always implies a degree of impenetrability: 'Nothing gets through, which is why it touches.' This finds its analogue in Roberts's poetry, when he writes that 'Skin is border country. | Ever exiled from each other, | we come here to meet' (C, 41). Furthermore, previous chapters have demonstrated how Roberts's notion of bodies extends as much to geographical spaces and bodies of knowledge as it does to notions of a physical corpus. The same mechanics can be extended to the idea of public and personal bodies. Waters and Pollard concentrate on the idea of a public and private overlapping, and Pollard writes that 'Friend and readership, private interlocutor and public body: these *yous* meet and mingle, at the line of the text'.<sup>12</sup> This chapter section, however, will argue that the meeting of personal and public in

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<sup>12</sup> Pollard, *Speaking to You*, p. 2.

'Last Words' is marked by a particular degree of impenetrability in favour of the personal, which prevents the two spheres (public and personal) from 'mingling' too much. Above all, as in the case of other binaries figured in Roberts's poetry, 'Last Words' ultimately pays most of its attention not to the *I* or the *you*, but to the space or the movement between them.

'Last Words' was first published as a twelve-part numerical sequence dispersed throughout the collection *The Half Healed*. Each of the short poems begins with the italicised line '*You have a new message:*' followed by a break and then the rest of the poem. Each poem contains one further italicised phrase or variations of the phrase, '*you know, I'm sure, but here's to say I love you*'. These 'interrupted protestations of love', writes Wheatley of the poems, suggest 'telephone calls from burning buildings or hijacked planes'.<sup>13</sup> The italicised portions are not to be taken as verbatim quotations of the victims of 9/11. Instead, they are Roberts's response to his observation of footage of the events, which was available to the public. As such, 'Last Words' is a poem commissioned by a British public broadcaster, written by a member of the British public for the British public. The circularity this generates will be addressed in the second half of this section. Roberts notes in an interview that the victims of 9/11 'could have expressed anger or fear, but almost all left messages of love and its continuance. That says something hopeful about the human spirit'.<sup>14</sup> The repeated phrase '*I love you*' in 'Last Words' becomes a metonymic stand-in for all the individual personal messages left for relatives and loved ones.

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<sup>13</sup> David Wheatley, 'Messages from the Conflict Zone', *The Guardian*, 11 October 2008, para. 3 of 6.

<sup>14</sup> Gerard Smyth, 'Michael Symmons Roberts: a religious poet in the secular age', *Irish Times*, 25 September 2014, para. 8 of 12.



The poems in the sequence often speculate on the question of what to do with such a message, a question that Roberts poses himself: 'Would I keep it in a silk bag? Could I bear to listen to it? Would I find it a comfort?'<sup>15</sup> The tactile quality of the 'silk bag' echoes an extensive use of the language of touch in these poems. Roberts's experience of witnessing the events of 9/11 in faraway Macclesfield involved a palpable degree of detachment: 'It was like watching a movie special effect – until we began to hear of the human stories.'<sup>16</sup> As will become evident, Roberts's use of the language of touch and the effect of lyric touch is in part an attempt to address this sense of detachment and to close a series of distances: between viewer and event, victim and relative, personal and public, poem and reader, while at the same time constituting each as a separate body, and being careful not to close the gap completely.

In 'Last Words – IV', Mill's notion of the poem as something 'overheard' is staged in a particular technological context. The 'message' describes itself as 'the voice-mail | you keep in a sealed silk bag | in a tin box in the attic'. It is 'the tape you cannot | bear to play'. This highly personal and highly private exchange is triply concealed ('in a sealed silk bag | in a tin box in the attic'). Yet 'overhearing' it is inevitable: 'The message is out, in the ether, | in the network of digits and wires. | *I know, you're sure, I love you*'. The way the phrase *I love you* is both deeply, personally concealed, while at the same time being publically out 'in the ether', reflects the

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<sup>15</sup> Cassandra Jardine, 'The poet who was inspired by the recorded farewells of the doomed', *The Daily Telegraph*, 10 September 2002, para. 2 of 3.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 1 of 3.

fundamental ambiguities Waters and Pollard recognise in the 'unspecified *you*'. In 'Last Words', *I love you* seems to be directed at a single recipient, yet the *you* also contains a plurality of possibilities. It is this ambiguity which allows the *I love you* to simultaneously negotiate both public and personal spheres. *I love you* is both highly personal in its meaning, as well as being so ubiquitous to be public. This ambivalence of the phrase finds its echo in Roland Barthes's notion in *A Lover's Discourse*, when he writes that 'like a child's word, it enters into no social constraint; it can be a sublime, solemn, trivial word, it can be an erotic, pornographic word'.<sup>17</sup> There is nothing to overhear in the phrase *I love you*, since we have heard it all before; and since the poem is preceded by a certain assumption that the address is from a victim of 9/11 to a loved one, there is nothing confessional or untoward about it. Nothing could be more appropriate. In fact, there is an extent to which the 'message' played across all the poems in 'Last Words' is already so obvious, ubiquitous and public, that at times it does not even have to be completed. Fractions of the message repeat themselves, and the phrase metonymically stands in for itself: 'Here's to say' (28), 'You know, I'm sure...' (36, 48). There is a way then, that the public quality of the *I love you* functions as a way of obscuring its personal quality, for the benefit of those for whom it is not intended. The *I love you* takes on its full meaning only on receipt by the intended addressee, and the integrity of the personal message is preserved in part by the ambivalence of the phrasing.

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<sup>17</sup> Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 148.

By contrast, Armitage's treatment of the events in 'Out of the Blue', a production for Channel Five, broadcast in 2006, is much less ambiguously personal:

You have picked me out.  
through a distant shot of a building burning  
you have noticed now  
that a white cotton shirt is twirling, turning.

In fact I am waving, waving.  
Small in the clouds, but waving, waving.  
Does anyone see  
a soul worth saving?<sup>18</sup>

In this section, Armitage's poem is like a dramatic monologue establishing the point of view of a single victim, who comes to stand in for the whole experience. The *you* is the distant viewer (the poem was again inspired by a particular section of TV footage).<sup>19</sup> There is no 'overhearing'. *You* are being spoken to directly. In the attempt at rendering the persona's interior world, personal and public forcefully invade each other, and the viewer crosses the line from one into the other. In 'Last Words', the point of contact is much less invasive than in the Armitage poem. In the Roberts poem, the public body and the personal are constituted by each other, rather than compromised, in the ambivalence of the phrase *I love you*.

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<sup>18</sup> Simon Armitage, *Out of the Blue* (London: Enitharmon Press, 2008), p. 29.

<sup>19</sup> "'Out of the Blue" by Simon Armitage (Analysis)', *Simon Armitage: Writing Poems BBC Two*, 22 November 2012 (1 minutes 20 seconds – 2 minutes 2 seconds).

Another key trope which Roberts uses to negotiate public and personal spaces in 'Last Words' is the 'voice-print'. In 'Last Words – I', the speaker says 'I lay these voice-prints | like a set of tracks, to stop you getting lost'. This description of the messages and of the poems themselves is repeated in the negative in 'Last Words – II', when the speaker says 'I do not want to leave you this | magnetic print, this digit trace, | my coded and decoded voice'. The second speaker's reluctance is attributable to the fact that the answerphone message is implicative of their absence ('I do not want to leave you.').

If there is a sense in which the speakers' absence in 'Last Words – II' brings their line of address close to certain risks involved in Mill's notion of the 'overheard', then this is because there is no guarantee that the intended recipient will receive the answerphone message; or that the message is not heard by an unintended recipient; or that it is heard at all. This ambiguity translates into an urgent and existential question in the penultimate poem in 'Last Words', when the speaker asks:

Where did my last words go?  
Out and out on radio waves  
into the all-engulfing emptiness,  
fading to a whisper as they cross  
from sky, to space, to nothing.

In another analysis however, the risk of being overheard is not simply an unwanted consequence of sending a personal message. Maclachlan, for instance, in his tactile

analysis of Shakespeare's *Sonnet 109*, argues that there is an extent to which the risk of mis-reception is in fact a condition of all messages. Maclachlan writes that 'a declaration of love' in particular '[...] can only reach the other, touch the heart of the other, on the condition of possibly going astray, of being received by some other'. Precisely because a declaration of love is written in a shared language, Maclachlan suggests that it is to a certain degree available to anyone who shares in that language. He writes:

Even the adoption of a secret code, or pet name, could not vouchsafe a message to a unique destinee, in as much as such a code or a name would still have to be subject to a minimal requirement of decipherability.<sup>20</sup>

Distance, which provides the possibility of 'going astray', becomes a condition of any declaration of love according to Maclachlan. In this sense, the personal quality of the messages figured by Roberts cannot exist without the risk of exposure to the public because they must take place in a shared language.

Maclachlan's reading, however, does not allow for the specificities of the intersection of the poem and contemporary technology. Jackson, on the other hand, specifically links the capacity of Helen Cixous's writing for 'remote touching' to a notion of 'telephonic touch': 'Touching at a distance, the telephone performs remote contact; it demonstrates that we can make contact even from afar'.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ian Maclachlan 'Long distance Love: On remote Sensing in Shakespeare's Sonnet 109', in *Sensual reading New Approaches to reading in Its Relations to the Senses*, ed. Michael Syrontinski and Ian Maclachlan (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2001), p. 61.

<sup>21</sup> Sarah Jackson 'Touching Freud's Dog', *Angelaki*, 15 (2010), 187-201 (p. 193).

Jackson extends some of these mechanics to poetry and develops the idea of a 'tactile poetics' that is able to touch from a distance. Roberts's answerphone messages by contrast, come with their own technological specificities. Unlike the telephone in which the recipient of the message might be to some extent identified or confirmed, the answerphone message seems to offer no such return. If the 'voice-print' of 'Last Words' has something of Jackson's 'telephonic touch' about it, then it is in the way the touch is, as Nancy writes, 'deferred':

Bodies, for good or ill, are touching each other upon this page, or more precisely, the page itself is a touching (of my hand while it writes, and your hands while they hold the book). This touch is infinitely indirect, deferred – machines, vehicles, photocopiers, eyes, still other hands are all interposed – but it continues as a slight, resistant, fine texture, the infinitesimal dust of contact, everywhere interrupted and pursued.<sup>22</sup>

The 'voice-prints' in 'Last Words' can be understood as having an 'infinitesimal dust of contact, everywhere interrupted and pursued', as it is precisely in the tactile pursuit for the 'voice-prints' and their promise of interrupted contact, that public and personal come to touch most obviously. In 'Last Words – III' for instance, the figure of the 'systems analyst' is figured as an 'archaeologist', searching manually through the debris of public records and bureaucratic archives for the personal messages represented by the 'voice-print':

Systems analyst turns archaeologist:

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<sup>22</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. by Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 51.

his fingertips, as delicate as brushes,  
sift through sediment of conferences,  
helpline hints, arguments and cold calls,  
searching for the ones that say  
*You know, I'm sure, I love you.*

In 'Last Words – VI', the *you* being addressed seems to be the 'systems analyst'  
again:

This is the voice you fished  
with microphones on long lines,  
lowered into cracks between  
the rocks of this new mountain.

However, the *you* also contains a sense of the plural, so that the address becomes  
one made from personal to public. As the poem progresses, however, the  
description states how:

[...] your ears ache with the effort,  
the sheer will to listen, to conjure  
my words, your name on my lips,  
out of nowhere. [...]

The address becomes much more specific, hinting at a particular name touching the  
lips of the speaker, a name the general reader will know not to be their own. Rather  
than being an invitation to trespass, the gradual exclusion of the general reader

from the personal moment of the poem affirms something of the integrity of that personal space. At the same time, the poem allows the reader to identify with some common thread, as it concludes with the sequence's ubiquitous refrain. In 'Last Words – IX', the searcher is still at the task:

Still, a year on, you rifle through  
black boxes, mail-boxes, voice-boxes,  
in search of my final words.

The difference in this case is that the speaker did not have time to leave any last words. Consequently, the addressee is forced to draw on the public sphere, for words available to everyone that *you* might encompass, thus helping to constitute a personal exchange: 'If I'd had time | to leave you words, you know, I'm sure | they would have been *I love you*'.

In each of these tactile exchanges between public and personal, there is an emphasis on the integrity of the personal. The tactile image of the word on the speaker's lips, for instance, demonstrates how a personal moment is made inaccessible to the public reader. This argument is somewhat complicated, however, by the fact that in 'Last Words – V', the central lines of the poem and the core of the personal moment are rendered by a highly tactile vocabulary:

Don't remember this, don't save  
this message. Keep instead  
the pictures of last Sunday



in the park when summer  
leaves were turning, roller-bladers  
hand-in-hand, our boys  
throwing fists of cut grass at each other.

This entire passage is the closest Roberts gets to figuring the level of personal detail which Armitage employs in 'Out of the Blue':

Here is a Liquorice Allsorts tin.

The flag of St. George.

A cricket ball.

Here is a calendar counting the days.

Here is a photograph snug in its frame,

this is my wife on our wedding day,

here is a twist of her English hair.<sup>23</sup>

However, while the answerphone message or the answerphone poem risks being 'overheard', there is no equivalent of being overheard in the language of touch. Unlike the words *I love you*, which can be said and overheard by someone not part of the exchange, the tactile core of the personal moment is specific and experiential and cannot be appropriated. That is not to say that touch is uncomplicated or not

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<sup>23</sup> Armitage, p.32.

subject to misunderstanding. In the final poem 'Last Words – XII' for instance, the speaker says

My voice has printed like a bruise,  
like a kiss, like a kiss so strong  
it leaves a bruise. *I love you.*

The identity of the *you* is not anymore specific for being touched. However, in other moments, the distortion of the recording brought about by mobile phone signal interference causes the voice to 'splinter in my throat, | as if struck by a sudden despair' (45). Even if trespass is sometimes invited by the ambiguity of the *you*, there is also a distinct sense that when the reader is touching on the personal they are resisted. In this case, the humanisation of technology, through technology's capacity for failure, signals the edges of the personal space and experience ('struck by a sudden despair'). In 'Out of the Blue' by contrast, Armitage identifies the *you* with the media, or those witnessing the event through the media ('You have picked me out. | Through a distant shot of a building burning'). However, the reader in this poem is invited to venture beyond the shot of the newsreel and speculatively into the mind of the ventriloquized victim, without resistance ('Do you see me, my love. I am failing, flagging.').<sup>24</sup>

When 'Last Words – XI' asks 'where did my last words go', the first half of the poem figures the words travelling outwards into the public and beyond, 'on radio waves |

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

into the all-engulfing emptiness'. The second half of the poem, however, addresses the idea of interiorising the words, learning them by heart:

Or in, and in, a litany repeated  
in your heart until all tape is obsolete.  
Each cadence, every tongue-tick,  
every breath is perfect, as you say  
my words: *You know, I'm sure ...*

Aside from the pronounced tactility of the speech act which the 'tongue-tick' draws attention to, another particular moment of contact is being set out in this poem. The lyric touch according to this poem occurs through the reading of another person's words. This reading, like a religious liturgy, is simultaneously public in its outward form (the generic nature of the words) and personal in its act of interiorisation. On Roberts's own use of the liturgy as a model for public-oriented poetry, he writes that 'poems are ritualistic, not read like most prose to follow a story or glean information; poetry is incantatory, thrives on repetition, is best learnt by heart'.<sup>25</sup> In terms of lyric touch, what is of consequence in a liturgical sense is not repetition in the sense of the same person repeating the same text by themselves, but the contact that is made between people in the internal repetition of a shared text.

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<sup>25</sup> Michael Symmons Roberts, 'Poetry in a Post-Secular Age', *Poetry Review*, 98 (2008), 69-75 (p. 75).

Another way to consider this effect is by way of the description in 'Last Words – VII', in which the addressee is told to 'remember, silence is not absence', and to 'Learn to weigh them, | one against the other'. The poems that Roberts's sequence is composed of can similarly be identified as the point at which silence and absence are brought to touch:

Each room of our house contains  
a different emptiness. Listen.  
Then break it. Say the words  
*you know, I'm sure, I love you.*

The 'voice-print' is indicative of the speaker's absence. It is also an on-going reminder of the speaker's continued silence. The poem and the 'voice-print' then are the point between silence and absence, in which each makes itself felt against the other. However, the central frustration of the poem is exemplified here also in the fact that while silence can be broken, the distance at the heart of the significant absence cannot be closed.

Pollard suggests that poets 'cannily' invite trespass from their readers as a strategy, through the way in which they direct their lyric address. Taking as her example the poem 'Dear Bryan Wynter' by W.S. Graham, she writes:

If as readers, we feel we eavesdrop on a private conversation directed to a particular other, we are also aware that Graham cannily *invites* that sense of trespass, by deliberately adopting the exclusive-sounding address of the letter writing form.<sup>26</sup>

Trespass in this sense is staged and paradoxically invited in the way the poem is framed by its title. There is a similar sense in which trespass is staged in 'Last Words', in that the construction of the poem invites the reader to eavesdrop on answerphone messages that are not intended for them. This again occurs through a framing device, in this case the shared opening line of the poems, '*You have a new message:*'. However, in the context of the 9/11 poem, as a particular kind of occasional poem contextualised by its own discourse, it can also be argued that in using the trope of the answerphone messages in the first place, 'Last Words' is in fact committing a much less staged kind of trespass.<sup>27</sup> In the following discussion, I consider the extent to which, in these poems, the victims of 9/11 are being silenced or ventriloquized in the interests of the poet. I will reflect on the specificities of the 9/11 poem as an occasional poem, and the particular effects this has in terms of lyric address and lyric touch. I will show how within this context, the lyric address in some cases becomes a circular address between those who witnessed 9/11 and provide testimony from a distance, but which excludes engagement with the actual event. It is my contention however, that Roberts's poetry attempts to break this

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<sup>26</sup> Pollard, *Speaking to You*, p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> See Nikolai Duffy, 'The Poetics of Emergency', *Jacket Magazine*, 32 (2007); Jeffrey Gray, 'Precocious Testimony: Poetry and the Uncommemorable', in *Literature after 9/11*, ed. by Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 261-284; Antony Rowland, *Poetry as Testimony: Witnessing and Memory in Twentieth-century Poems* (New York, Routledge, 2014); Dale Smith, "'Lyric Poetry after Auschwitz'?: Kent Johnson and Political Satire', *Jacket Magazine*, 37 (2009).

circularity by drawing attention, not to the event itself and not to the remote witness, but to the space between them. In this way, Roberts's poetry positions 'the between', as the condition by which his writing is both separated and also connected to the event at the same time.

In his study *Poetry as Testimony: Witnessing and Memory in Twentieth-Century Poems*, Rowland sets out the context by which this can be understood. Rowland's book, like Pollard's and Waters's, shifts the emphasis of critical discourse on contemporary lyric address onto the *you*, since 'appeals to addressees are one of the key aspects of poetry as testimony'.<sup>28</sup> In his opening chapter, 'Who Are "You"? Addressivity and Vicarious Testimony in Wilfred Owen's Poems', Rowland sets out how Owen, 'the progenitor of poetry as testimony', uses the 'deliberate ambiguity' of his address.<sup>29</sup> The reader is in part invited to empathise with the speaker who is giving testimony to the events of the war, while at the same time being told they are not in a position to empathise, because they have insufficient experience to do so.<sup>30</sup> In this sense, the reader is faced with a similar turning away to the reader of 'Last Words' when contact with the personal is made, but at the last moment is rebuffed. In the context of poetry as testimony, Rowland's discussion of 9/11 poetry, his final chapter, 'A "Map of Trauma Whose Borders Are Still Missing": Poetry and 9/11', also demonstrates how far 'Last Words' is exemplary of that body of poetry. The way in which Roberts uses tactile imagery, for instance, to mark the

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<sup>28</sup> Rowland, *Poetry as Testimony*, p. 21.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18. At this point Rowland is debating issues around James Campbell's notion of 'combat gnosticism'.

point at which language exhausts itself, echoes the way in which much post-9/11 literature finds that language falls short of what is needed to address the reality of such a moment.

Rowland writes of the sense in which, because the events of 9/11 apparently left no primary witnesses who are also survivors, a space has been opened to allow writers to testify on the victims' part, even from a distance. This is legitimised by the pervasive sense that, as Rowland sets out, those who, like Roberts, saw the events on the television became witnesses too. Rowland, however, argues strongly against this idea of 'global witnessing'.<sup>31</sup> Instead, he opens the term witness up to include those who were in an immediate proximity to the 9/11 event, such as many of the poets in *Poetry After 9/11: An Anthology of New York Poets*. Furthermore when he warns that 'the apparent democratization of suffering through footage actually elides the testimony of primary witnesses in New York', this warning can be thought to be directed at works such as 'Last Words' and 'Out of the Blue'.<sup>32</sup> Rowland ultimately suggests that poems from the position of 'global witness' induce the public to believe 'that we have all "seen" 9/11 and can thus begin to work through its traumatic scenes and impact together'. As a result, rather than mark the occasion, the act of commissioning 'Last Words' and the sequence itself 'are merely adding to the process of forgetting the event'.<sup>33</sup> In fact, although the lyric address of the poem is directed from the victims of 9/11 to the surviving relatives within the

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<sup>31</sup> Rowland, *Poetry as Testimony*, p. 109.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 121.

poem, in terms of the poet and the intended BBC audience for whom the poem was occasioned, the line of address runs exclusively between 'global witnesses'.

However, it can be argued that 'Last Words' and 'Out of the Blue' are actually engaging with the idea of the 'global witness' itself. 'Last Words' and 'Out of the Blue' are both responses to 'footage', and 'Last Words' in particular makes the 'footage' and all its deferring technical implications a central tenet of its sequential arc. If the figuration of the answerphone messages in 'Last Words' invites trespass from the reader, it is only to eventually turn them away. In doing so, the sequence as a whole draws attention to the fact that the broadcast of these messages was a trespass on a global scale. In this sense, parallels can be drawn between the poetic response of a remote witness such as Roberts and a witness such as the New York poet D. Nurske, who similarly struggles with issues of global witnessing in his poem 'October Marriage' from the *Poetry After 9/11* anthology:

Huddled before the news  
we touch the screen –  
our bombs rain on Kandahar –  
but we can't feel them:  
just a thrum, the pulse,  
a film of dust, a red glow  
shining through our nails.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *Poetry After 9/11: An Anthology of New York Poets*, ed. by Dennis Loy Johnson and Valerie Merians (New York: Melville House, 2002), pp. 87-88.



The idea of the onscreen events as being untouchable, the screen making a physical obstruction between the domestic sphere of the living room and the public arena of war, is echoed in Roberts's poem by the repeated way that the figuration of the victims' experience is rendered ungraspable for the reader. Similarly, personal relations between victims and relatives are constituted as a touch between them, but one which the reader cannot 'overhear', as there is no tactile equivalent of this experience. In the end, Nurske, too, uses touch to figure the ultimate inaccessibility of a moment to which one has not been a survivor-witness. The falling bodies of 9/11 are left in the final lines of his poem suspended 'gracefully | in midair, holding hands'.

Roberts's poem is focused on the distance, spatial and chronological, between the global witness and the event. The attempt in the poem is always to close that distance with the language of touch, through 'fish[ing] | with microphones on long lines' or 'rifl[ing] through | black boxes, mail-boxes, voice-boxes'. The frustration at not being able to close the distance is not only that of the survivor's relatives, but in a very different sense also that of the remote witness. Underscored by the Nancyan 'infinitely indirect, deferred' quality of the answerphone message it portrays, Roberts's poetry is exemplified by the finger tapping on the screen in Nurske's poem, which connects to, but ultimately separates from the event. Unlike Jackson and Maclachlan who argue for the possibilities of touching across distances, Roberts's poetry, which knows that it cannot touch across distance, emphasises instead the failed attempt. The lyric touch in Roberts's poetry then is a kind of reaching towards, without ever arriving.

In the context of the British 9/11 poem, this is entirely congruent. Both Roberts and Armitage witnessed the event remotely, from the UK. As Alicia Ostriker, a New Yorker who on 9/11 also found herself in the UK, writes in the introduction to *Poetry After 9/11: An Anthology of New York Poets*:

We and the Brits watched, like everyone else, for days, seeing the same shots over and over, and hearing the same solemn voices. [...] It was very strange to be so far away. It felt wrong.<sup>35</sup>

The distance, which is a source of strangeness for Ostriker, becomes the focus of Roberts's poetry. It is the same distance, and its preservation conveys a degree of integrity to the personal sphere. As with all the binaries discussed in this thesis so far and which Roberts constellates, the focus is not on the event, but on the space between the observer and the event. Similarly, the *I-you* binary of Roberts's lyric address is notable for the way in which his poetry draws attention not to the functions of the *I* or the *you*, but on the movement between them, the grasping towards an unreachable limit.

### **Caring: Touching the Dead and the Corpse Poem in *Corpus* (2003)**

The dead and dying are a conspicuous and troubling presence in Roberts's poetry, from the figuration of Weil's last moments in *Soft Keys* (1993) to the voices of the

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<sup>35</sup> Johnson and Merians, p. xi.

victims of 9/11 in *The Half Healed* (2008). The collection *Corpus* (2004), meanwhile, with its wide-ranging examination of the body in all its forms, demonstrates a pronounced engagement with the corpse. I will argue that, while in traditional figurations the corpse is often signified as the presence of an absence, acts of touch between the living and the dead in Roberts's corpse poems stage what David Sherman describes as the 'corpse's proper care for its own sake' by insisting on the corpse as a material presence. This act of care occurs against a background of the diminishing role of the family member in the care of the corpse and its replacement by extra-familial professionals, such as the pathologist. As a result, the corpses in Roberts's poems demand to be touched, and offer their own instructions on the way this touch is to occur.

With its focus on the corpse, and the way in which the corpse's physical integrity is repeatedly emphasised, this chapter section appears to signal a change in trajectory in terms of the thesis's core argument. Previous chapters have illustrated the way in which Roberts's poetry has constructed binaries only to subvert them, and has drawn attention again and again to 'the between', as a kind of non-space which allows for movement to occur. The next three sections, in turn, seem to insist on 'the between' as a material presence: the physical integrity of the corpse; the geographical site of Greenham Common; and the Weilean 'metaxu', which is repeatedly analogised through the image of a wall. However, the change in tack is not as radical as it first seems. All three chapter sections continue to evidence the value Roberts's poetry places on the sense of exchange, through the tropes of care, contamination and 'metaxu', a separation or division that is also a means of

connection. 'The between' as barrier is not contradictory to the sense of 'the between' as movement or exchange, since it continues to insist on the fundamental mechanics of Robertsonian touch, that a degree of impenetrability is necessary for contact and exchange to occur.

Critical writing on the corpse in literature suggests that twentieth and twenty-first-century poetry is 'populated to an unusual degree by corpses', due to the cataclysmic, violent events which inaugurated the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, against this background, dramatic renegotiations with death practices took place on a day-to-day basis, by which duties of care towards the dead were shifted from family and friends to a growing professional body including morticians, doctors and pathologists. Sherman writes of the 'modernized corpse':

On the one hand, it lay for the first time at a complicated intersection of medical institutions and procedures, industrial processes, governmental bureaucracies, legal codes, and commercial exchanges; on the other, it involved dramatically less ritualization, physical contact with family and friends, and community attention than in the past.<sup>37</sup>

While Sherman focuses on the Modernist period, the duties of care in Robert's poetry demonstrate that many of the same concerns have prevailed into the

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<sup>36</sup> John Redmond, 'John Burnside: The Corpse as Threshold', in *Poetry and Privacy: Questioning Public Interpretations of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (Bridgend: Seren, 2013), pp.130-155 (p. 130).

<sup>37</sup> David Sherman, *In a Strange Room: Modernism's Corpses and Mortal Obligation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 8.

contemporary era. Poems such as 'Post-Mortem', in which an eviscerated corpse narrates its own tactful reassembly by a mortician-like figure and the poem 'Pathologist' both centrally figure the mortician/pathologist, a figure which in Sherman's analysis comes to perform touch in the family's stead. In addition, Roberts's corpse poems include those in which the duty of care towards the dead is completely neglected, such as 'Corpse' (in which a dead body is left out on the street), and those in which it is reversed, with the dead extending the duty of care towards themselves ('Food for Risen Bodies') and towards the living ('The Hands'). Diana Fuss is very specific in stating that a corpse poem is 'a first-person poetic utterance, written in the present or past tense and spoken in the voice of the deceased'. For Fuss, the corpse poem represents a 'curious paradox' ('A poem quickens language while a corpse stills it.').<sup>38</sup> Roberts's poetry, however, expands on this definition, by drawing attention to the language of touch as a means of communication, which the corpses in his poetry are capable of, even though they do not always speak. As such, this thesis widens Fuss's definition of the corpse poem to include poems which feature touching as well as talking corpses.

Through the tactile representations of corpses being handled or not handled, all of Roberts's corpse poems engage with the duty of care and the ethical responsibility a culture extends towards its dead, or what Sherman calls our 'mortal obligations'. Sherman's particular focus is the question of what it means 'in the twentieth century, to be alive to the dead bodies in one's midst, to actively care for them, to

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<sup>38</sup> Diana Fuss, *Dying Modern: A Meditation on Elegy* (USA: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 44.

claim them in acts of obligation.’<sup>39</sup> This ‘active care’ is demonstrated in Roberts’s poetry through both the professional care given to corpses in the poems ‘Post-Mortem’ and ‘Pathologist’, and the self-care demonstrated in ‘Food for Risen Bodies’. Failure of care is in turn reflected in poems such as ‘Corpse’, in which the body is not touched at all. Sherman writes that at ‘the heart of mortal obligation is an ethical desire for the corpse’s proper care for its own sake’, which he frames as ‘an instance of the symbolic integrity of a culture’s material practices’. These ‘material practices’ are reflected in Roberts’s emphasis on the touch between living and dead, which insists on the corpse as a material presence in his work.<sup>40</sup>

The corpse poem, by virtue of its preoccupation with the deceased, touches on the genre of the elegy (‘a poem of loss or mourning’ *PEPP*, 397). The corpse poem as set out so far though, particularly the notion of insisting on the corpse as a material presence, lies in contrast to the traditional elegy in its most basic sense, which is constructed, according to Sherman, ‘for the sake of the emotional well-being of the living’.<sup>41</sup> With its privileging of absence over presence, the elegy’s function, according to Iain Twiddy, is ‘to take the cold, metallic fact of death and ease it into meaning and relief’.<sup>42</sup> For Jahan Ramazani, by contrast, modern elegists ‘resist consolation’, and insist on and expose grief to question rather than offer relief from

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<sup>39</sup> Sherman, p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> Jacques Derrida also writes about ‘care’ in *The Gift of Death* (pp.1-34). The focus on ‘care’ there though is primarily engaged with the Heideggerian notion of *Sorge*, and thus triggers an ontological question, which touches on but is significantly different from the ethical issue at stake in the acts of care figured by Roberts and echoed by Sherman.

<sup>41</sup> Sherman, p. 9.

<sup>42</sup> Iain Twiddy, *Pastoral Elegy in Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (London and New York: Continuum Literary Studies, 2012), p. 7.

it.<sup>43</sup> Ramazani frames the elegiac ‘poetics of healing’ and their contribution to cultural amnesia as an insufficient response to the atrocities of two World Wars and the Holocaust.<sup>44</sup> Geoffrey Hill’s poem ‘September Song’ for instance, in the way it exposes the fact that his elegy for a victim of the Holocaust is inevitably self-serving (‘I have made | an elegy for myself it | is true’),<sup>45</sup> becomes ‘a poem that mourns the diminished efficacy and legitimacy of poetic mourning’ in the face of these events.<sup>46</sup> This sense echoes Rowland’s comment from the previous chapter section on post-9/11 poems ‘merely adding to the process of forgetting the event’ (see above).

The focus in both cases, whether healing or keeping the wounds open, is framed by the work of mourning the living have to do, a critical context framed by Freud’s ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ (1917), which analogises the work of mourning with the psychological processes of melancholia. While Twiddy continues to draw on the therapeutic function of grieving, Ramazani explores the ‘violent, recalcitrant’ potential of melancholia as a mode of mourning.<sup>47</sup> What is significant in Roberts’s corpse poems is that, while here too ‘the dead are a task’,<sup>48</sup> the work itself is not in the work of mourning — that is the ‘detachment of the ego’ from its libidinal investment in the deceased in order to become ‘free and uninhibited again’ — but

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<sup>43</sup> Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. xi.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>45</sup> Geoffrey Hill, *New & Collected Poems 1952-1992* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994), p. 55.

<sup>46</sup> Ramazani, p. 8.

<sup>47</sup> Twiddy, p. 19; Ramazani, p. xi.

<sup>48</sup> Sherman, p. 6.

in the act of physical care extended towards the dead and the insistence on their presence that accompanies it.<sup>49</sup>

The poem 'Post-Mortem' begins with the words 'This is my body', echoing the *hoc est enim corpus meum* repeated during Mass. This statement sets the corpse up as the speaker of the poem, as it describes what is effectively a reverse autopsy: the body is gradually put together by an attendant of some kind, before being resurrected and shown the way to the 'next room'. Whether the attendant in the poem is a mortician or a kind of forensic pathologist, their presence in the poem bears out Sherman's assertion when he describes the 'modernized corpse' as beginning to demand 'high expertise among a wide range of technical specialists'.<sup>50</sup> As such, Sherman's description of the pathologist is as a figure that seems to symbolise precisely the opposite of care, or at least represents the way care has been displaced from the family to the pathologist. This is heightened by the fact that the pathologist is protecting herself against the corpse's touch, protecting her life against its death, echoing Kristeva's notion that 'the corpse represents fundamental pollution':<sup>51</sup>

She wears a mask too,  
a plastic face-shield, gloves,  
blue shiny gown; armour of life

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<sup>49</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XIV, trans. by James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1957), pp. 243-258 (p. 245).

<sup>50</sup> Sherman, p. 8.

<sup>51</sup> Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 109.



against the seeds of where I've been.

As discussed in Chapter 2, Kristevan abjection is an ambivalent motion by which the self constitutes its boundaries by expelling what it identifies as other to itself, such as vomit or certain foods. In terms of the biblical symbolic order that supports a particular conception of self, Kristeva writes that the corpse poses the threat *par excellence*:

A decaying body, lifeless, completely turned into dejection, blurred between the inanimate and the inorganic, a transitional swarming, inseparable lining of a human nature whose life is undistinguishable from the symbolic [...] A body without soul, a non-body, disquieting matter, it is to be excluded from God's *territory* as it is from his *speech*.<sup>52</sup>

The idea of the corpse as a contaminant is not to do with physical threat, but with a psychological contamination of psychic and symbolic structures. The protective clothing against the corpse worn by the pathologist for instance resonates with early biblical prohibitions against touch, including the indictment that 'All who touch a corpse, the body of a human being who has died, and do not purify themselves, defile the tabernacle of the LORD' (Numbers, 19. 13). If the Kristevan corpse threatens to blur the lines of symbolic order, then prohibition and protection reconstitute these lines. Fuss argues that the figuration of protection against the corpse is in fact central to the genre of the corpse poem as a whole:

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

The critical prerequisite of any corpse poem is distance, an emotional buffer separating the voice of the poet from the body of the corpse, as if to shield the poet from the contamination and contagion of such proximity to the dead inevitably entails.<sup>53</sup>

However, in 'Post-Mortem' the dissection of the body is performed in reverse, and by the end, even the mask is forced to slip as the attendant gives the corpse the kiss of life in an intimate moment of touch. The attendant begins by feeling the 'ice-spores of marble, | in my pulse-less arm'. This thermal-tactile register is followed by a careful description of the corpse's manual reassembly, which works on several tactile registers:

She heaves huge jars down from a shelf,  
Unscrews one, lifts my gut-coil  
From its marinade of formalin,  
Gently shakes the drips onto the floor.

She weighs it on a grocer's scales  
And slip it into me. It's cold,  
but her assistant settles it  
and stitches it in place.

The tactile registers include the reference to weight, the use of textural inferences ('slips it into me'), and another thermal-tactile reference to the 'cold'. Above all, the suggestion of care, in the sense of being careful, is made clear by the use of the word 'gently', and the way that in response to the shock of the cold, the assistant

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<sup>53</sup> Fuss, p. 72.

‘settles it’. This attention to care is continued as ‘Livers, stomach, lungs’ are ‘each cradled’, and as the attendant and their assistant ‘plant the heart’.

Before the final reanimation, the corpse notes how ‘My skin sticks to the stainless steel’, and the attendants proceed to ‘hose me down’ and peel the body free.

Redmond notes that for a poet like Burnside the skin ‘may open a path to a higher reality’, but only on the condition that the skin is broken.<sup>54</sup> The act of care in ‘Post-Mortem’, by contrast, operates according to the mechanics of touch in Roberts’s poetry: the skin separates one from the other, but on this condition makes union, touch and care possible. In this sense, in order to touch the dead without violent appropriation (breaking the skin), the skin has to be given back its integrity and ‘seal[ed] with thread’. The ‘higher reality’ in turn is reserved for the corpse. The attendants themselves do not go into the ‘next room’.

Redmond draws attention to the way in which in one of Burnside’s poems

the physical activity of working with a corpse is implicitly equated with the literary activity of describing one. To dissect, to inter, to butcher, to embalm – such procedures, which are celebrated as technical accomplishments, are set down beside what the poet’s technique accomplishes.<sup>55</sup>

This description can easily be applied to Roberts’s poem ‘Post-Mortem’. Here, too, the careful work of the attendants can be equated with the carefully maintained

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<sup>54</sup> Redmond, p. 134.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

quatrains of which the poem is comprised. This attention to technique in a corpse poem is also something that links it to the elegy. The very root of elegy begins with its provenance in the name of a particular formal convention (*PEPP*, 397). In the same way that skilful care is taken over the corpse, the underlying body of loss and grief is to some extent contained by attention to form. Twiddy, informed by the libidinal mechanics underscoring the work of mourning as illustrated by Freud, also writes that where poets 'makes use of regular forms [...] it suggests that the mourning process is served by structures which can order and maintain emotive energy'.<sup>56</sup> However, in the case of 'Post-Mortem', the sense of grief or loss are not apparent. Roberts's poem instead insists on the corpse's presence through the description of the weight of its organs, and the way the skin sticks to the table. The attention to form is a structural integrity, which reflects the integrity of the corpse's skin, as well as 'the symbolic integrity' of the 'material practices' figured in the poem. This 'symbolic integrity' involves bringing together the role of the pathologist with that of the priest, as the kiss administered by the pathologist is placed on the lips in the manner of the viaticum (the Eucharist administered to conclude the last rites of the dying).

After the kiss, the attendant informs the corpse that 'In the next room you will find | some simple clothes and food'. This gives a strong sense in which this poem can be read as a precursor to the 'Food for Risen Bodies' sequence, even if it does not precede the sequence in the collection. 'Food for Risen Bodies' can be thought of as

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<sup>56</sup> Twiddy, p. 15.

taking place in ‘the next room’, and most of the poems in the sequence revolve around the first meals of the titular risen bodies. While the bulk of the poems are notably culinary in their register, the postprandial finale is remarkably tactile. The sequence up to that point concentrates on the meals enjoyed by a plurality of risen bodies in the afterlife. Michelis describes how this representation of ‘the undead body as a body that eats [...] places the body in an in-between state, neither dead nor alive’, despite being resurrected.<sup>57</sup> What this allows the poet to do, as in other religious corpse poems, is to explore the afterlife,<sup>58</sup> and as Redmond suggests, the corpses in ‘Food for Risen Bodies’ demonstrate the way in which ‘by prompting implicit questions about the afterlife, a corpse may serve, too, as a screen for the author’s patterns of belief’.<sup>59</sup> However, as Michelis writes, while ‘the religious, in particular Christian, meaning of the poems is more than evident’, there is a sense in which ‘there is also something that strains against such a narrow framework of interpretation’.<sup>60</sup> In ‘Post-Mortem’ for instance, the act of care demonstrated by the pathologist is compatible with the idea that the body proceeds to walk into the ‘next room’, but it is not contingent on the fact that this room represents the specific Christian conception of the afterlife, which forms part of the religious framework underpinning Roberts’s poetry. Similarly, the literal imagining of the risen body in ‘Food for Risen Bodies’, while Christian in provenance, allows a much wider interpretation in terms of self-care. This argument once again bears out the

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<sup>57</sup> Angelica Michelis, ‘Rhyming Hunger: Poetry, Love and Cannibalism’, in *Revista Canaria De Estudios Ingleses*, 60 (2010), 61-78 (p. 71).

<sup>58</sup> See Fuss, pp. 50-57.

<sup>59</sup> Redmond, p. 130.

<sup>60</sup> Michelis, ‘Rhyming Hunger’, p. 74.

way in which Roberts's incarnational poetics are able to include a readership to whom the symbolic currency of the symbolic structure he uses are unfamiliar.

In the final poem of the sequence, the dead realise that 'flesh retains a memory | | even beyond death'. In effect, the skin serves as a record of life and 'every | lover's touch, each blow or cut | | is rendered into echo on the hand, | the lips, | the neck'. The poem describes how 'their own phenomenology | is mapped across them'. Michelis suggests that 'bodies, rather than as stable entities, are here imagined as sensory networks, interwoven in and with time and thus without beginning and end'.<sup>61</sup> This idea of the corpse blurring temporal and spatial boundaries is echoed by Kristeva's sense in which the corpse blurs the limits of the self. By way of further example, the idea of the corpse as an unstable entity also has its effect on the way care is given, and in this regard it is worth noting briefly, the way Maurice Blanchot describes the destabilising effect the corpse has on notions of directionality, and in particular the direction of care. Blanchot describes the way the presence of absence, which the corpse represents, confounds 'the care we take of the dead', as the care has no destination. We are caring for someone who is no longer actually there. Our attempts at administering care, writes Blanchot, then 'can no longer know their direction, fall back upon us, return toward us'.<sup>62</sup> Echoing the movement of the elegy, care for the dead becomes an act of self-care, or simply returns to us a reminder of failed contact. According to a Robertsonian mechanics of touch however, corpses are finite, a physical presence, and offer a tactile return,

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>62</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. by Ann Smock (London and Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), p. 257.

like the Christ-like figure in 'Food for Risen Bodies – VI', for instance, 'who went ahead to find a route | | for them', and 'came back with wounds | intact and palpable'. These wounds at first suggest a loss of integrity (in the sense of 'the condition of not being marred or violated', *OED*). However, as the dead feel 'No pain', they are able, 'silent' and 'astonished', to reflect on their past troubles, their 'history | of love and war in blank tattoos'. As Angela Failler points out in the context of self-harm:

a wound upon one's own skin may create an occasion to care for the self, whether by cleaning or subsequently trying to secure the wound or merely by witnessing the wound as it appears and begins to heal.<sup>63</sup>

In the case of the risen bodies, the capacity to acknowledge and recognise one's wounds constitutes an act of self-care in the terms Failler describes. A similar act of care is extended to the living in 'The Hands', a poem in which a child soldier commits an atrocity in a village ('I go in with a machete, | Come out with a sack of hands. | My fathers feed me, count the pairs.'). Because this is a child, the eventual haunting by the hands of the dead is forgiving in nature. The actions the hands complete as they 'stroke | my head', 'draw down my eyelids', and 'shush my lips' are delicate and careful, and suggest parental care. The dead insist once again in tactile figurations on their material presence, integrated with Christian notions of the innocence of children and the need for forgiveness. The child trope is developed further in relation to the Cold War in the next chapter section.

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<sup>63</sup> Angela Failler, 'Narrative Skin Repair: Bearing Witness to Representations of Self-Harm', *ESC*, 34 (2008), pp. 11- 28 (p.16).

One of the difficulties in Roberts's corpse poems, however, is prompted by the fact that acts of care towards the dead do not always seem particularly caring in the sense of being 'compassionate, concerned' (*OED*). The way the attendant kisses the body back to life in 'Post-Mortem', for instance, is described as 'passionless'. Fuss traces a historical line from Emily Dickinson to Randall Jarrell and beyond, by which the tone of the speaking corpse becomes increasingly detached and 'flat', something she links to the shift in attitude towards the dead at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>64</sup> However, in Roberts's poetry, the 'passionless' quality of the kiss given by the attendant can be explained as much through the mechanics of touch that operate in his work, in which a degree of separation is always the condition of touch. In the context of 'Post-Mortem', the attendant's gloves, for instance, are precisely what allow them to touch the dead without contamination. The detached kiss, in turn, at the end, may be 'passionless', but this does not preclude it from being careful in the sense of being 'full of care or concern *for*, attentive to the interests *of*, taking good care *of*' (*OED*). In fact, passion, with its intimations of the physical pain of Christ and its more ubiquitous sense of 'any strong, controlling, or overpowering emotion' (*OED*), to a degree intimates a sense of carelessness, the very opposite of what the poem is staging. In order to care, it is necessary to be careful and restrained, to know, as Derrida writes 'how to touch *without* touching, without touching *too much*'.<sup>65</sup> As such, the kiss in Roberts's poem

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<sup>64</sup> Fuss, pp. 52-63.

<sup>65</sup> Jacques Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. by Christine Irizarry (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 67.



exemplifies Derrida's notion of the 'law of tact', by which its passionless-ness ensures the difference between care and violation is maintained.

However, Roberts's poetry also demonstrates the peril of being so restrained as to not to touch at all. In 'Pathologist', for instance, the act of touch is completely absent, and instead the focus is on the ocular ('Autopsy means "*to see with one's | own eyes*". I have seen too much.'). The engagement in this poem with the tactile register is limited to the word 'lukewarm'. The pathologist attempts what the attendant does in 'Post-Mortem', that is to restore the corpse to its original integrity, by filling the corpse with 'seawashed pebbles, just enough | to bring the dead weight back'. However, the speaker is haunted by dreams in which the risen dead are seen 'spitting out my stones'. In this poem, something in the duty of care has failed. Without the necessary figuration in tactile language to insist on its own physical presence, the disembodied corpse haunts the pathologist's dreams instead. Similarly, in the poem 'Corpse', the speaking corpse of the title is not touched as 'Men step | over me'. The organs of touch, the hands, are left to 'point up and down the street'. The conclusion is vague, but foreboding: 'The sky – not bright – is green with storms'. The corpse demands to be touched, and in both cases in which the corpse is not shown tactile care, in which correct 'material practices' are not observed, the symbolic integrity is compromised and the corpses turn to haunting or are left arrested in a purgatorial limbo.

Whether or not Roberts's individual stagings of touch between the living and the dead genuinely demonstrate acts of care does not preclude the fact that a wider

degree of ethical carelessness ('heedlessness, inattention, thoughtlessness, negligence, indifference', *OED*) has been demonstrated in the appropriation of corpses 'as a screen for the author's patterns of belief'. Redmond argues that while corpses offer contemporary writers a certain poetic opportunity, they also evidence a degree of poetic opportunism. He writes:

When pondering the legacy of past bloodshed, we might argue that corpses force their way in to literary structures, but in truth, poets and their poems rarely offer resistance.<sup>66</sup>

Redmond ultimately identifies the use of corpses in poems as a 'convenient exploitation'. In a wider critical context, Derrida's *The Work of Mourning* raises similar issues. The editors of the book draw attention to the ethical dilemmas faced by Derrida as a eulogist, and these dilemmas often echo those of the elegist. The central predicament is always whether it is as unethical to speak (thus appropriating the dead for one's own purpose) as it is to refuse to speak (and thus fail to publically acknowledge one's grief). The dangers faced by the eulogist, such as appropriating the dead for selfish reasons, might be offset by speaking of or for them, and in this way keeping them alive. However, while Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas summarise Derrida's position as being one whereby 'nothing we can say of or to [the dead] can touch them in their infinite alterity', the fact that you can touch the dead and perhaps should touch the dead is the very starting point of Roberts's figurations of post-mortem acts of care.<sup>67</sup> For Fuss, too, the corpse poem

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<sup>66</sup> Redmond, p. 130.

<sup>67</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, ed. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 11.

raises questions about the ethics of appropriating the dead for poetic purposes.<sup>68</sup>

However, for Fuss, the elegiac form offers a kind of 'ethical' exploitation, in which poetry is employed 'not merely to recognize the dead but also to bring them back to life'.<sup>69</sup> While Fuss concedes that 'a poet's deceased family and friends provide singularly inappropriate subjects for the corpse poem's brazen fantasy of resuscitation', she points out that in fact

in my recovery of speaking corpse poetry, I have uncovered not a single poem in which a poet ventriloquizes the voice of a deceased parent, child, sibling, lover, or friend.

Roberts's poems, with their anonymous corpses, bear out these findings, and reflect Fuss's conclusion that 'if mourning were the chief motivation behind the corpse poem, one would expect to find a wealth of poems memorialising dead loved ones'.<sup>70</sup> As has been demonstrated, for Roberts, the 'chief motivation behind the corpse poem' is not 'mourning', but tactile care, and a degree of distance and separation is the condition of this care. Fuss positions the corpse poem on the edge of elegiac discourse, and at times (in the case of the 'literary corpse poem') as anti-elegiac, writing that 'corpse poems, unlike elegies, strive to reconstitute death, not to compensate for it'. The corpse poems which Fuss identifies, often actively resist the elegist who will not let them die.<sup>71</sup> However, Fuss also points out that 'even anti-elegies are, of course, elegies' and as such implicates them in the same

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<sup>68</sup> Redmond, p. 130.

<sup>69</sup> Fuss, p. 7.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

discourse.<sup>72</sup> Roberts's corpse poems, in turn, are about 'managing a presence' rather than lamenting an absence, and resistance (in the form of skin, weight, cold) is again a necessary condition for touch between the living and the dead.<sup>73</sup> The dead in Roberts's poetry both demand and resist being touched at the same time, both physically and ethically, a paradox which is the underlying movement of care.

This section demonstrated the corpse's insistence on being touched in Roberts's poetry. The tactile exchange with the corpse is repeatedly underscored in Roberts's writing as well as in surrounding critical literature by the threat of contagion it presents to the living. In the next section, a similar sense of contagion in the form of radioactive contamination will be considered as an analogy of the way touch works between Roberts's text and the reader. In Roberts's poetry, the threat of contamination causes the pathologist to treat the corpse with tact — a touch that confirms, rather than violates, boundaries. While the mechanics of nuclear contamination demonstrate a complete disregard for certain kinds of physical barriers, radioactive touch will be shown to be similarly instrumental in constituting limits that belong to dominant symbolic orders.

### **Contamination: Cold War Poetics in *Burning Babylon* (2001)**

The collection *Burning Babylon* (2001) maps the history of the Greenham Common USAF Airbase, which housed American nuclear missiles on British territory during

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>73</sup> Sherman, p. 9.

the Cold War. As promised by the collection title, Cold War tropes in *Burning Babylon* are often figured in a religious register, which includes Levitical prohibitions against touch demarcating the base perimeter (“‘DANGER – Razor Wire’, ‘DANGER – Barbed Wire’, | ‘ABSOLUTELY no access’ ...”), the eschatological menace of nuclear war itself, and the way residents in the local community use reliquary to protect themselves against nuclear threat. When the nuclear missiles are delivered within proximity of the local town of Newbury, domestic and private spheres become contaminated with the fear of being contaminated, a sense which draws on the broader, latent anxiety of post-Hiroshima Cold War culture.

The previous section considered the way in which processes of guarding against contagion ensures careful practices towards the dead. While in the previous section, contamination did not occur, however, in this section it does. I will argue that in *Burning Babylon*, contamination is not registered at the moment of contact itself, but evidenced in its aftereffects: the obsessional-compulsive behaviour of the book’s characters, the way poetic and narrative genres contaminate each other, and the way the reading process itself is figured as a process of contamination. Surface areas which form traditional points of contact, whether they be personal (skin), spatial (perimeter fences) or even textual (poems), are problematized by radioactive exposure, as exterior integrity no longer serves as a guarantee of protection from this kind of touch. Furthermore, I will demonstrate that, as Roberts’s poetry commonly figures surface integrity as a condition of touch, the boundaries circumventing the Cold War poetics of *Burning Babylon* come to rupture the poetic corpus of which they are a part.

Cold War poetry is generally thought of as poetry written during the Cold War period, in particular the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>74</sup> A contemporary poetry collection such as Roberts's, which is written retrospectively, and which covers a time period from the bombing of Hiroshima in 1945 to shortly after the end of the Cold War in 1991, problematizes this categorisation. However, even if *Burning Babylon* cannot be easily classed as Cold War poetry, it exemplifies a series of tropes, which are indicative of a Cold War poetics. These tropes include the idea of the Cold War as being a war of words, Hiroshima's pervasive legacy in the post-Bomb unconscious, the disintegration of the integrity of the domestic sphere (both in the sense of home and homeland), and the particular function of children to demonstrate the personal impact of political choices. I will now consider each of these tropes in turn, before establishing the way contamination is figured through them as a way to both circumvent and constitute boundaries.

The notion of a Cold War poetics represents something of a tautology, as the Cold War, more than most conflicts, can be said to be primarily textual in nature. In 'Pointing to East and West: British Cold War Poetry', Adam Piette argues that this itself has become something of a Cold War myth and that the 'Cold War only looked like it was just a war of words — it actually killed thousands in the "Third" World,

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<sup>74</sup> Jon Lance Bacon, *Flannery O'Connor and Cold War Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Steven Gould Axelrod, 'Between Modernism and Postmodernism: The Cold War Poetics of Bishop, Lowell, and Ginsberg', *Pacific Coast Philology*, 42 (2001), 1-32; Edward Brunner, *Cold War Poetry* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Adam Piette, 'Pointing to East and West: British Cold War Poetry', in *The Oxford Handbook of British & Irish War Poetry*, ed. by Tim Kendall (Oxford University Press: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 632-652.

Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan'. He also allows however, that 'it was nevertheless a war which was waged as a form of words as well, with its own systems of propaganda and persuasion'.<sup>75</sup> Jon Bacon similarly suggests that, while the Cold War was for many pilots and defectors a fatal war with real consequences, 'the symbolic order imposed on international relations by a clearly defined, morally charged conflict lends itself to literary studies'.<sup>76</sup> In this sense, Derrida's description of the Cold War phenomenon as '*fabulously textual*' is apposite. The Cold War is '*fabulously textual*', writes Derrida, because 'for the moment, a nuclear war has not taken place' and 'one can only talk and write about it'.<sup>77</sup> Rowland identifies Derrida's reading of nuclear war's 'radical metaphoricity' as the less dominant way of reading the event, the alternative discourse emphasising the inarticulable scale of the atrocities at Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the silence these were met with.<sup>78</sup> In a sense, *Burning Babylon* demonstrates a positioning of the two together. The fear of contamination is a fear of an exposure that could but has not yet occurred, what Derrida terms 'fabulous specularization'.<sup>79</sup> This immediate anxiety around the missiles stored on Greenham Common in the 1980s, however, is also informed by a latent anxiety caused by a post-Bomb cultural memory, which has consigned the bombing of Hiroshima to the unconscious, what Peter Schwenger refers to in literary terms as the 'textual unconscious'.<sup>80</sup> Schwenger describes the way

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<sup>75</sup> Piette, p. 644.

<sup>76</sup> Bacon, p. 2.

<sup>77</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)', *Diacritics*, 14 (1984), 20-31 (p.23).

<sup>78</sup> Antony Rowland, *Tony Harrison and the Holocaust* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001), pp. 17-18.

<sup>79</sup> Derrida, 'No Apocalypse, Not Now', p. 23.

<sup>80</sup> Peter Schwenger, 'Hiroshima in the Morning', in *Thinking Bodies*, ed. by Juliet Flower MacCannell and Laura Zakarin (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp.109-119 (p. 114).

Hiroshima's position in the unconscious comes to represent not just the real, historical atrocity, but what any city 'may yet become'.<sup>81</sup> Repeatedly in Roberts's poetry, the Bomb is figured not just as historical fact, but also as a figure pervading the mental lives of those who lived through the Cold War. As Edward Brunner writes of the Bomb in the poetry of American poet Helen Bevington, 'it pervades and corrupts the imagination'.<sup>82</sup>

Piette also writes of the 'Cold War's polluting influence' in the context of exclusively British poetry,<sup>83</sup> and in this regard Roberts's Cold War poetry broadly exemplifies the way in which the writing of many British poets is 'keyed in to the important sub-genre of American nuclear poetry'.<sup>84</sup> If the influence of American Cold War tropes (in particular the figuration of the vulnerable domestic sphere and the child) is noticeably strong in Roberts's collection, then this is entirely consistent with how forcefully the presence of the American military is felt in the British community around which the collection is set:

They have imported geography –

4th Avenue, 2nd Street West,

Main Street USA.

They have a theater, no theatre.

Even the hydrants

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<sup>81</sup> Schwenger, p. 119.

<sup>82</sup> Brunner, p. 223.

<sup>83</sup> Piette, p. 648.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 647.



are from distance sidewalks.

Are these the first settlers.

Toe-hold for a colony? (*BB*, 18)

In the collection, Greenham Common becomes an extension of the American frontline, and in *Burning Babylon*, American poetic anxieties are imported with the Bomb. Roberts's own orientation towards American poetics is evidenced in other collections through his use of epigraphs by American poets such as John Berryman (*RS*, vii) and Elizabeth Bishop (*RS*, 16), and thematically in the poem 'To John Donne' as is discussed in Chapter 2. In a wider sense though, the specific orientation towards American tropes is also a characteristic of British Cold War poetry more generally. Piette identifies the way in which British poetry responds to the Cold War through a series of affiliations, torn between East or West, ranging from the 'anti-Americanism and anti-communism of the Movement poets' to 'the neo-Marxist "Trotskyite" attachments of the Cambridge school' and 'the deflected image of the superpowers in the poetry of the Troubles'.<sup>85</sup> While not falling obviously into any of these categories, broadly speaking, Roberts's poetry demonstrates an engagement with an American narrative which Piette terms the 'nuclear sublime'.<sup>86</sup> The 'nuclear sublime' encapsulates the mechanics by which a certain kind of peace is affected through the threat of mass destruction. However, Piette also identifies a 'third space between' in British Cold War poetry, 'the twilight zone between East and West'.<sup>87</sup> Among those Piette identifies as being 'opposed to the dual gravitational

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<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 632.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 642.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 645.

draw of East and West' are feminist writers such as Denise Levertov, who were 'temperamentally allergic to the Cold War's male power games and militarization of culture'.<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, Piette identifies these writers as being broadly part of a 'field of energy', which is most fully materialised in the acts of resistance at Greenham Common

especially the 'Embrace the Base' action on 12 December 1982, when more than 30,000 women converged on the base and linked hands to encircle the nine-mile perimeter fence (also linking the nine camps at the nine gates — code-named after the colours of the rainbow).<sup>89</sup>

These peace protestors also feature in *Burning Babylon*, although they are as foreign to the local British perspective set out in the collection as the Americans are:

One was young, her feet were younger;  
slim and smooth and coated in mud,  
bare on the shop tiles. She wore a silver hoop  
on the long toe of her left foot,  
a secret sign of marriage or vocation  
worn by nomads from the high plains. (*BB*, 30)

The 'third space between' as illustrated by the peace women in *Burning Babylon* is to a certain extent borne out by Roberts's position as a whole, particularly in the

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 646.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 648.

way that the book 'ponders Britain's role as Cold War player and target', and the sense in which the country is positioned as a between-space.<sup>90</sup> The image of Cold War Britain as being sandwiched between two vying superpowers is consistent with Roberts's broader theme of exploring, not the points of the binary, but what connects them and where their meeting occurs. This is exemplified in *Burning Babylon* in the poem 'Strange Meeting' (in which a titular strange meeting of its own occurs with the war poem by Wilfred Owen). In this poem, Soviet inspectors at the end of the Cold War come to 'confirm the silos' emptiness' by checking for 'the tell-tale signs of sudden | recent moves, the warm prints | of missiles in their midden' (BB, 42). Britain, in short, becomes the between-space, where American and Soviet powers finally touch.

The collection's sense of between-ness is demonstrated by the dual status of the town of Newbury itself. In the 'textual unconscious' of *Burning Babylon*, the titular city functions to signify both Hiroshima and Newbury simultaneously. 'For in one hour she has been laid waste' (Revelation, 18. 19) is the biblical description of the destruction of the titular city of Babylon. Derrida points out how this 'economy of speed' — that is the fact that 'a gap of a few seconds may decide, irreversibly, the fate of what is still now and then called humanity' — is also a determining quality of the Cold War.<sup>91</sup> The bomb flash at Hiroshima (*pika*) becomes synonymous with an exaggerated kind of rapidity in the term '*pika-speed*' (BB, 61). The potential fate of the residents near the Common is also marked by a crystallised temporality: 'one

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 645.

<sup>91</sup> Derrida, 'No Apocalypse, Not Now', p. 22.

white-out instant of ultimate light', 'one split-second starburst' (*BB*, 27). The tension between the two cities, the reality of Hiroshima and nuclear potentiality of Newbury, cannot be articulated, and will instead find its expression in the way the integrity of the domestic sphere is gradually eroded, through compulsive behaviours and deteriorating personal relationships.

In an interview, Roberts describes the immanence of nuclear war, as represented by the missiles stored at Greenham Common, as 'world-stage politics played out on somebody's doorstep'.<sup>92</sup> The effect of the way the Cold War brought the political sphere to bear down on the domestic was destabilising to both family structures and the mental life of the individual. This is evidenced in the way that American Cold War poetry such as Robert Lowell's portrays 'a private realm that has been invaded by political anxieties'.<sup>93</sup> It is also echoed in American prose by the climate of fear around the threat of invasion — identified in Flannery O'Connor's writings — which sees the Cold War narrative extend towards 'privileged settings in American culture', such as the domestic.<sup>94</sup> (The strong presence of this trope also evidences the way O'Connor's influence on Roberts in terms of her relation to Catholicism is borne out otherwise in his poetry.)<sup>95</sup> Unlike wars in the past, which were fought at a front line, the Cold War extends its reach across great distances. Greenham, in particular, felt like it was under deadly scrutiny. This shows that the

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<sup>92</sup> Chris Arnot, 'Nuclear Families', *Guardian*, 28 February 2001, para. 16 of 16.

<sup>93</sup> Hugh Stevens 'Poetry: Confession, Autobiography and the Politics of Privacy', in *American Cold War Culture*, ed. by Douglas Field (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), pp.164-184 (p. 165).

<sup>94</sup> Bacon, p. 3.

<sup>95</sup> Thomas Day, 'In Conversation with Michael Symmons Roberts', *PN Review*, 199 (2011), 52-55 (p. 199).

trope of the threatened domestic sphere was not uniquely American, or at least accounts for the way this trope was imported wherever an American presence made itself felt. Caroline Blackwood describes visiting the Women's Peace Camp in the 1980s, and notes:

I felt chilled by the thought that Russian missiles were trained on to the very spot where I was standing and I started to understand the fear that had driven these women to this ominous fence to protest against the lethal weapons which they believe are placing humanity on the perimeter of extinction.<sup>96</sup>

The sudden proximity of the 'perimeter of extinction', writes Brunner, is a result of the fact that 'the gap formerly separating distant places has collapsed' in the Cold War, 'and areas whose remoteness once guaranteed their impregnability now turn vulnerable'. Brunner writes this in particular regard to the unpredictable effects of radioactive fallout in Bevington's poetry. The degree of helplessness this causes is further exemplified in the way 'the child begins to figure so prominently in Bomb poems after 1950'.<sup>97</sup> The most emblematic Cold War poem in this regard, and which occurs repeatedly in criticism on Cold War poetics, is Lowell's 'Fall 1961', in particular the lines 'A father's no shield | for his child'.<sup>98</sup> While everyone is defenceless against the Bomb, in their innocence, children function as more powerful signifiers of this fact than adults do. In *Burning Babylon*, parents are not just failing to protect their children. Fathers like Mr. Jones, who works at the

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<sup>96</sup> Caroline Blackwood, *On the Perimeter* (London: Heinemann, 1984), p. 3.

<sup>97</sup> Brunner, p. 223.

<sup>98</sup> Stevens, p. 170.; Axelrod, p. 350.; Brunner, p. 227-228.

laboratories in Aldermaston, which prepare radioactive material, are the threat — as evidenced by his daughter's dream in which he brings radioactive material into their home in his briefcase. This also draws attention to the way that another trope of Cold War poetics involves the way 'our bombs are turned against us no less than against any enemy'.<sup>99</sup>

The difference is that while Lowell and Bevington write during the Cold War, for Roberts as a child growing up near Greenham Common, the Cold War was a formative childhood experience. In this sense, *Burning Babylon* can be said to have been written retrospectively by the Cold War child represented in Lowell's poem, and is as much an example of Cold War poetry as it exemplifies Cold War poetics. Another contemporary British example of this is 'Cuba' by Muldoon. 'Cuba' shows the way the broader international structures at play in the Cold War come to surface at the level of the nuclear family. In particular, the patriarchal underpinnings of the Cold War are manifested in the poem, through the way the father and the priest have modelled their power on 'presidential power of the casual destructive word', that is the word that gives the missile command.<sup>100</sup> Again, the child is a central trope in the poem, and symbolises the subjection of the innocent to corrupting forces. Particular to Muldoon's poem is the way in which the girl in confession offers an alternative to the contact of violation or annihilation put forward by the male adults:

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<sup>99</sup> Brunner, p. 223.

<sup>100</sup> Piette, p. 651.

'Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.  
I told a lie once, I was disobedient once.  
And, Father, a boy touched me once.'  
'Tell me, child. Was this touch immodest?  
Did he touch your breasts, for example?'  
'He brushed against me, Father. Very gently.'<sup>101</sup>

Against this background, touch in Roberts's poetry can be understood as gentle too, but in a different way. Contamination is not felt at all at the point of contact, but only recognised as having occurred in its aftereffects. The following poems demonstrate the way in which *Burning Babylon* exemplifies Cold War poetics. 'Touched', 'The Qualities of Fallout', 'Payload', 'Collateral Damage', 'Pika' and 'Symptoms' offer a glimpse of the 'textual unconscious' at work in *Burning Babylon*, and set up the pervasive effects of the sublimated Hiroshima legacy. 'The Baton', in turn, is an example of the contamination of the domestic sphere in the sense of the home and the family, a trope compounded by the figuration of the same children in 'Melissa Jones' and 'Feast of the Innocents'. These tropes also all demonstrate to varying degrees the way in which contamination operates, both between the book's characters, between genres, and between the text and the reader in Roberts's poetry.

The cross-contamination of genres in *Burning Babylon* results in part from the fact that it is the only poetry book of Roberts's that is divided into titled subdivisions,

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<sup>101</sup> Paul Muldoon, *Poems 1968-1998* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 79.

numbered from one to four, sequential subdivisions which proceed in a sense like chapters ('I – Collateral Damage', 'II – Sorties', 'III – Friendly Fire', 'IV – Hypocentre'). This sense is substantiated through the use of two prose poems, 'A Pilot's Coat' (BB, 13-14) and 'Summer Advent' (BB, 22-23), and references to a narrative device (the *deus ex machina*) in the title of the two-part sequence 'Deus Ex Machina I' (BB, 57) and 'Deus Ex Machina II' (BB, 61). The *deus ex machina* is a device used to interrupt the narrative and alter its course. Some of the poems in *Burning Babylon* mention specific dates and refer to actual historical events of the period, so that there is a degree of historical narrative too. During the 1980s, the Greenham Common USAF Airbase was subject to heavy protests and home to a semi-permanent protestor settlement, the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp. It is, however, the perspective of local people, who witness the arrival of nuclear weapons into their local environment which is predominantly featured. In particular, the experiences of the Jones family and their children (Jason, Melissa and Lisa) are developed across several poems. The revisiting of the same characters across poems is typical of Roberts's other collections and even occurs across books. For example, the poem 'Hosea Thomas in the Realm of Miracles' (SK, 17-23) and the poems 'Hosea's Body' (RS, 47) and 'Archaeology' (RS, 48) all feature the eponymous character Hosea. What is different about the children in *Burning Babylon* is the consistent degree to which they are revisited through a single collection, from beginning to end, mapping their development, justifying the sense that it is accurate to refer to them as characters, even though they are part of a poetry collection.



'Touched' is the opening poem of the collection, although this sense of 'opening' cannot necessarily be equated with the collection's beginning, as it is preceded by a series of peritexts: a dedication (to Roberts's children), an epigraph (to the collection as a whole), the contents pages (which reveal the collection is divided into four subdivisions), acknowledgements, a subdivision title, and an epigraph to the subdivision. These various obstacles the reader has to navigate echo the prohibitive signs on the fences that encircle the airbase. This sense of hesitancy around beginning, and the series of fences that the reader is made to cross to arrive at the opening poem, both holds the reader back from, but also draws attention to the radioactive subject matter at the heart of the collection. When one does finally arrive, the word 'ungloved' in the opening poem delivers an immediate sense of exposure to this subject matter, and if one thinks in terms of a poem touching the reader, then this poem has just contaminated them:

#### TOUCHED

When geiger's ungloved finger  
brushes thorium, uranium,  
its nervy click-tongue quickens  
to a heart's-race, so it croons  
the first note of a love song,  
holds it, and forgets the rest. (*BB*, 3)

If the reader feels contaminated by the first poem in a collection, it encourages them to search for a solution further inside the text. The poem 'Touched' facilitates

this movement by describing the 'ungloved finger' of the Geiger counter as reading the radioactive material almost like braille. The words 'thorium' and 'uranium' generate a vocalization, a clicking, which speeds up to become one long note. This 'first note of a love song' is held, and the 'rest', the poem says, is forgotten. It is nothing but 'first note'. 'Touched', in other words, is a poem that begins but does not end; it is a poem that opens without closing, in that it ends on the word *rest*, in the sense of 'that which remains or is left over; the remaining, esp. unused, amount or portion' (*OED*). For a proper sense of an ending or a closing, the reader must look to the rest of the collection, where to a degree a solution is found in the completion of the historical narrative, which sees the removal of the nuclear missiles and their threat from the base, or the partial restoration of the Common to nature. In this way, the contamination of genres offers its own solution to the problem it causes.

'Touched' introduces the Geiger counter as an organ of touch, which 'brushes' the radioactive element like a 'finger'. In fact, it is the only organ of touch that has the necessary subtlety to feel contamination. The residents of Newbury themselves are in turn left 'imagining the geiger counter across our hands'. In 'The Qualities of Fallout', the speculating voices of the residents ask of the contamination, 'Would it be conspicuous as snowflakes, | only white-hot? Or subtle as | | that valley rain, which drenches | without ever being other than the air?' (*BB*, 4). The contamination from the speculative fallout is pervasive ('drenches'), while almost undetectable ('without ever being other than the air'). The poem goes on to ask if it is 'like cyanide — odourless | to half the world, burnt almonds to the rest?'. The word 'subtle' in the second line pertains to this, in its definition of 'not making a strong

impression on the senses' (*OED*). However, other meanings of 'subtle' also resonate with the idea of contamination as experienced in *Burning Babylon*: an 'immaterial thing: difficult to understand' and 'working imperceptibly or secretly; insidious'. In this sense, the first definition of 'subtle' correlates with notions of the immaterial or metaphysical as set out in Chapter 1. The latter meaning is to some extent determined by the prefix *sub-*. *Sub-* imbues the contaminating influence of the collection with a sense of being 'situated, existing, or occurring under, below, or at the bottom of' (*OED*). This geographical positioning of under is an attempt to locate something extra-corporeal in a corporeal dimension. It suggests the contamination does not touch directly, but subversively, which is echoed further on in the use of the word 'subtext':

Winter solstice. Deep advent.

Darkness is thicker than ever;

people are led through dry streets

by their dogs and their troubles,

and there is a new subtext to the sky,

something of cobwebs, salt and star. (*BB*, 4)

*Burning Babylon's* subtext is Roberts's equivalent of Schwenger's 'textual unconscious'. In 'The Qualities of Fallout', the sky's 'subtext' is its potential as the deliverer of nuclear missiles. 'Winter' in this poem may be thought of as nuclear winter, and 'advent', the preparation for the coming of Christ, or as the advent of

war. The 'cobwebs, salt and star' in the concluding line further develop something of this ambivalence. The cobweb plays on the collection's leitmotif, the patterning of perimeters and lines, the way they structure territory, but also serve to entrap the residents, held to ransom in the battle between the American soldiers and the Peace Camp protestors. Salt in turn evokes the wartime practice of sowing a conquered city with salt, which Roberts explores in the poem 'Salt' in *Raising Sparks* (RS, 26). The epigraph from the poem 'Salt' ('He razed the city to the ground, and sowed it with salt.' Judges, 9. 45) connects to the title of *Burning Babylon* ('For in one hour she has been laid waste.' Revelation, 18. 19). The star, too, responds to the idea of advent, as well as atomic explosions, which are 'hotter than the hearts of stars' (BB, 57).

As becomes evident, the means by which the reader is contaminated is through this violent subtext, and is echoed in the effects on local residents in the poem 'Payload':

First on the list of victims was a Stroud Green man  
— a loss-adjuster on long-term sick — whose cottage  
  
collapsed beneath the Galaxies' thunderous final descent.  
  
He had spent weeks sanding roof beams,  
  
so his home stood in a skeleton as fragile as his nerves.  
  
Was he making a seismograph, or his own mausoleum?

If asked, he would have said: '*I have to make it smooth.*' (BB, 21)

The way in which the poem's subject tries to construct his own reader, 'a seismograph', echoes the Geiger counter of the first poem, 'Touched'. The new reader senses the movements of the earth around him, possessing a powerful subtlety of feeling ('a skeleton as fragile as his nerves'). However, the fact that the man has been 'touched', that is, contaminated by anxiety, is also evidenced in the literal erosion of his home that has taken place ('weeks sanding roof beams'). It also connotes the sense of the word touched or touchedness in its equivocation over the 'state of being mentally "touched", slight insanity' (OED), exemplified in the irrational compulsion to '*make it smooth*'.

The neurosis of the 'Stroud Green man' is underscored by a wider tension caused by the Cold War's 'skewed polarities', whereby 'war meant peace; | both equally right and coterminous. | Cold was hot, light was dark' (BB, 8). Through its thermal register, the notion of a cold war has an intrinsic haptic property, although the most frequent thermal references are to heat: 'white-hot' (BB, 4), 'heat' (BB, 27), 'hot flesh curling' (BB, 27), 'hot-wired' (BB, 34 and 52), 'hotter than the heart of stars' (BB, 57), 'that scalding child' (BB, 64). However, despite this tactile evocation in the thermal register, the conflict is best known for its failure to make contact, in particular military contact between the Russians and the Americans. As the superpowers fail to make contact, acts of aggression are triangulated instead between the US military, the protestors and local residents. An atmosphere of physical violence saturates the collection's vocabulary: 'guts' (BB, 15), 'cleave' (BB,

32), 'burst' (BB, 34), 'slit' (BB, 45), 'dismembered' (BB, 45), 'lashed' (BB, 47), 'tears' (BB, 50), 'skinned' (BB, 57), 'beat' (BB, 62), 'slammed' (BB, 62), 'stunned' (BB, 62).

Another striking instance of violent language is the tactile abuse hurled in direct speech, first at the protestors and then at the military by the locals ('*Fucking dykes! Go fuck yourselves!*' BB, 39 / '*Fuck you yanks, and kiss my arse.*' BB, 52). Military language such as 'collateral damage' (BB, 6), 'friendly fire' (BB, 39) and 'second strike' (BB, 52) also punctuates the collection and persistently underlines the constant threat of fatal contact.

This immediate threat intensifies the threat already extant in the latent memory of Hiroshima. The collection *Burning Babylon* reconstructs this in the first part of the book, which chronologically precedes events at Greenham. This is particularly the case in the poem 'Pika' (BB, 5), which traces the development and deployment of the Bomb: 'Elusive, witnessed first on paper, | then in deserts, then one whole city | [...] After that it went to one more city, | then back to sands and seas.' The poem circumvents any description of the bomb, the way in which the poem 'Malchus' similarly circumvents the moment of contact (see Introduction). The title 'Pika' refers to the flash, a shortening of *pikadon* ('flash-boom'). *Pika* on its own is understood as 'a flash without a voice'. Again, there is a degree of noncontact emblematic of Cold War poetics as 'it entered them [survivors] | through eyes, then mapped them | in an instant – silver and alive.' The final image of the poem, however, is of the citizens of Hiroshima on New Year's Day in 1945, as 'Bridges fill with marvellers' to watch an 'outlandish snowfall for a warm | delta city'. The snow echoes the image set out in the previous poem 'The Qualities of Fallout', which asks

‘Would it be conspicuous as snowflakes, | only white-hot?’. There is a degree of what Derrida terms ‘fabulous specularization’ in both the fact that ‘The Qualities of Fallout’ starts with a question, but also in the fact that in ‘Pika’, the residents are left waiting for the Bomb, *in potentia* like the residents at Greenham.

Contamination in *Burning Babylon*, like the threat of nuclear war, is always speculative. In lieu of the cataclysmic collision which never arrives, the residents ‘in this our atom triangle | — Greenham, Burghfield, Aldermaston’ find their anxiety expressed in compulsive behaviours (‘Some of us cannot stop washing, | imagining the Geiger count across our hands’) and titular ‘Symptoms’ (‘Some conjure bruises like armfuls of tattoos | that warn the base is in their blood.’ *BB*, 7). The notion of washing recurs towards the end of the collection, when the base is dismantled and the builder Leo finds himself washing ‘his boots | a little longer at the end of each day’ (*BB*, 48). Together the images are reminiscent of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples ‘to teach them humility as a condition for the practice of charity’,<sup>102</sup> or the washing of the hands, which symbolises the ‘purity of conscience expected of the celebrant at Mass and the respect due to the Eucharistic elements handled during Mass’.<sup>103</sup> It is as if the ‘inability to confront nuclear presence that has become so embedded as to resist articulation’ can only be contained or articulated by a pre-existing language with the necessary resilience to do so — i.e. religious language.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> John A. Hardon, *Catholic Dictionary* (Image: New York, 2013), p. 530

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 530.

<sup>104</sup> Brunner, p. 221.

The 'fever' with which the residents of the 'atom triangle' are infected is described as 'subtle', a reference to the way the process of contamination works under and through things, allowing it to bypass walls and fences, to erode for instance the domestic sphere of the 'Stroud Green man'. A similar invasion occurs in the poem 'The Baton', in which the contaminating element is introduced directly into the heart of the nuclear family:

#### THE BATON

Melissa's nightmare is this:

her father home from work,  
film-badge pinned to his lapel,  
clouded by too many hours  
in Aldermarston's hot labs.

He kisses Melissa, Jason, Lisa;  
sets his briefcase on the table,  
invites them to peer inside  
between buff files.

Smooth, blue-grey, hard as iron,  
is a cylinder of Cobalt 60  
rolled in newspaper.

*'Go on, unwrap it.'* (BB, 19)



The atmosphere of menace in the poem stems from the fact that Melissa knows, given the nature of radioactive material, that she has already been touched by it, before she even begins to unwrap it. This unconscious terror is a continuation of her emotional state as represented in a previous poem where 'she lay awake and terrified' (*BB*, 13). Even though her father appears almost enslaved by his work (the labs are 'hot' and the badge is 'pinned to his lapel'), his Judas kiss, which he delivers before exposing his children to the deadly material, is consistent with the portrayal of the older generation as particularly guilty in respect to introducing this contamination into the community. This not only echoes Lowell's notion that 'A father's no shield | for his child', but reverses it in the sense that the father becomes what needs to be protected against. Both the American Cold War poetics of Lowell and the British Cold War poetics of Roberts are underpinned by male structures which position themselves as cause and solution to the issue of global nuclear violence. Then, through the resulting monopoly, they are able to perpetuate the dominance of this structure.

Unlike adults, such as the 'Stroud Green man' who is driven mad, children are able to redress the balance, such as at the imagined 'Feast of the Innocents':

In the venerable footsteps of boy bishops,  
Colonel Jason Jones—in finery—  
would taunt the powers all morning,  
launch a pre-emptive strike on the world  
after lunch, drink the bar dry  
then cleave his palate with a gun. (*BB*, 32)

In the penultimate poem, 'The Wanderer', Jason Jones, by now a grown-up himself, initiates a symbolic act of purification by returning to the place where he grew up and burning his old air force jacket, a sort of protective totem against nuclear war, 'hangs it on the flames | as on a chair-back' (*BB*, 63). In 'The Baton' though, the children are directly confronted with the source of the contamination, inside the father's briefcase, 'between buff files'. The father's imperative, '*Go on, unwrap it*', is the concluding line. There is a strong suspicion that like the warheads in the base, the material is not only untouchable because it is lethal (or because it is made of dream-matter), but also because the act of unwrapping would reveal its absence. It is emblematic of the tautology represented by Cold War poetics, in that it is 'fabulously textual'. Like the warheads surrounded by warning signs, the 'cylinder of Cobalt 60' is wrapped up in words on a newspaper. The contamination does not occur through the element itself but through text and subtext.

As with the 'Stroud Green man', the subliminal contamination takes its toll on Melissa later in the collection:

Rumour had it she was living  
like Eve in a copse by the Kennet,  
dressed in rags, eating birds and blackberries;  
a feral girl with juice-dark hands,  
living from pillbox to pillbox. (*BB*, 40)

However, unlike the 'Stroud Green man' who develops an ultimately fatal compulsion once he has been contaminated with the fear of contamination, Melissa protects herself by using 'relics' (BB, 40). In *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature*, Santanu Das explains how frontline soldiers in the Great War, under the duress of constant shelling, developed 'the perception of every sound as physical collision and possible annihilation, as a missed encounter with death'.<sup>105</sup> In *Burning Babylon*, this knowledge of shellfire and nuclear detonation has arrived with the residents through the sublimated historical memory of Hiroshima and pervasive media images such as the '*pikadon*: flash-boom in Japanese' (BB, 5). In the case of the residents at Greenham Common, it is at first the lack of sound, and a constant dread-filled anticipation of it, which causes anxiety to set in and contamination to break out:

Everyone agreed that here at target one  
we would be woken by a drone,  
a light plane at the end of its tether;  
then a sputter, then a whistling fall. (BB, 27)

The First World War soldiers quoted by Das find themselves developing 'absurd omens and fetishes to ward off the shell you hear coming'.<sup>106</sup> In the case of the local residents in *Burning Babylon*, it is the shell they do not hear coming, 'not an absence of noise | but real, present quiet' (BB, 17), as well as the insidious fear of

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<sup>105</sup> Santanu Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 81.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

its raw material constituents, which will cause them to reach for protective reliquary. For Melissa Jones in her pillbox, the threat inherent in the silence becomes too much:

She had told friends that she never slept,  
kept a night-long vigil for a sound  
like an aeroplane but very fast and falling.  
All here would be melt and white  
in the first moment of the third war.  
So she ran and hid, never came back. (*BB*, 40)

Melissa, like the 'Stroud Green man', seems in her 'feral' state touched with madness. Like the First World War soldiers described by Das, she reaches for 'her own relics' to protect herself, in the form of 'chocolate, candles, blankets, | a clutch of her mother's Valium | knotted in a yellow duster'. Importantly, the final relic she uses is 'a torn-out book of Genesis', a textual relic to ward off and contain a textual contamination.

If Melissa is driven almost mad by the contamination, and Jason undergoes a symbolic journey of decontamination by burning his old air force jacket, the construction workers who destroy the base after the Americans leave display a desire for contamination: 'Some men feel a strange nostalgia for the sirens, | [...] | terrors and tales of radiation sickness' (*BB*, 48). Most people, the poem concludes, will forever be reaching for reliquary to defend themselves. The subliminal

contamination experienced in *Burning Babylon* has no half-life of its own and will last as long as the residents' memories:

*'If you brought Komodo Dragons, Lovebirds  
and Banana Groves to this heath, no locals would come  
here more than once, and even then to lay a ghost.  
They will wear strings of garlic under jackets,  
will finger childhood relics – toy cars, dolls' hands,  
shells – as touchstones in their pockets.'*

Relics are intimately bound up with the sense of touch, as they are 'part of the body or clothing or something the person had used or touched'.<sup>107</sup> Reliquary in *Burning Babylon* has a dual function of serving both as historical testimony and as protection against contamination. The first mention of relics in the collection is relics as testament to the dead: an old woman is in a room where 'relics of her sons in uniform' are 'framed in steel' (*BB*, 6). Similarly, the local residents speculate on their own remains after the nuclear holocaust they anticipate: 'Even purists liked to think there might | be relics in this crystalline metropolis' (*BB*, 27). The same poem makes its reference to saints and martyrs 'with its | hair shirt of sand grains' (*BB*, 28). A wider notion of reliquary and memory is inherent in 'the few old men with memories', who 'will root among the scrub for kindling | and keepsakes, but in vain' (*BB*, 46). It is also evidenced in the total abandonment of the base by the American forces, who left 'a maquette of a nation, | from hydrants to street signs | [...] but there were precious few real relics' (*BB*, 47). The notion of historical

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<sup>107</sup> John A. Hardon, *Catholic Dictionary* (Image: New York, 2013), p. 423.

memory being embodied in an object is revisited further in the poems 'Grave Good' (*BB*, 56), 'The Fence' (*BB*, 59) and 'Remnant' (*BB*, 60).

In its role in maintaining memory, reliquary is connected to a sense of self-preservation, even if the self is only preserved in memory. In 'Tented Village', the women in the peace camp are repeatedly raided and evacuated and have their 'relics tied to wrists in bags | to keep them from the bailiffs' (*BB*, 35). The strongest sense of self-preservation, however, comes from the use of reliquary as a means of defence against contamination or nuclear extinction. The first instance of such a defence occurs when Jason Jones discovers a 'ghost-tree' on 'the wrong side of the wire':

Ash into ashes.  
If he could reach through the fence,  
he would have licked a finger,  
  
dabbed it in the shadow, and daubed  
his forehead as an amulet against  
the worlds of fire the base contained. (*BB*, 36)

Jason's principal defence, however, comes in the form of the green pilot's coat, which belonged to his sister's boyfriend. When the boyfriend leaves with his F1-11 squadron for the States, and Jason's sister Lisa dumps 'the jacket in the bin', it becomes a relic of the wandering pilot. To Jason, the significance of the jacket borders on the holy: 'It was just that the coat was immaculate, like a perfect mown

lawn' (*BB*, 13). The jacket's function is to isolate Jason from the world around him, much like the calico coat in the collection *Raising Sparks*, which isolates the wearer against electrical but also divine power. On the one hand, it means 'He is safe, he has nothing to lose, | no power can touch or pass through him', but on the other hand, it 'leaves a nameless sense of loss' (*RS*, 38). By the end of the first prose poem, the reader finds Jason similarly distancing himself from the world:

Leo stayed longer, and talked about the planes he had seen at the old Greenham Air Shows, but Jason was not interested in planes. He knew none of their names. He was not listening.  
(*BB*, 14)

This distance is reflected in the second prose poem, 'Summer Advent', through the fact that Jason cannot be heard by the character Helen, even though 'He shouted at her until he was hoarse' (*BB*, 23). The most sinister aspect of his protection is that the only way to make himself felt is by firebombing Helen's tent, which scars her for life. Helen's scarring also represents a further interplay between the notion of touch and memory. Only when, towards the end of the book, the nuclear threat has subsided, and when the threat to the reader has also subsided, does Jason destroy the jacket. At the same time, however, the 'tight foreign | tissue which now coats Helen's face' remains. (*BB*, 54)

In *Burning Babylon* the term relic is used not only in the sense of something that has been touched by a saint, but also in the sense of anything with protective qualities that can be touched itself, worn or consumed, whether through eating or

reading. The final stanza of the poem 'New Greenham Park' makes this explicit by describing how the residents will *'finger childhood relics – toy cars, dolls' hands, | shells – as touchstones in their pockets.'* Here, the child trope of Cold War poetics becomes not just representative of what is threatened by contamination, but the sense of innocence inherent in the idea of 'childhood' paradoxically becomes a means of protection. In a reversal of Lowell's famous lines, the child is a shield for the father.

While one reading suggests that the process of contamination is able to circumnavigate exterior surfaces and invade the domestic sphere and mental life of the civilian, another reading suggests that the fear of contamination in fact enforces and maintains the integrity of these perimeters. The militaristic language of carving up territory into lines of defence begins, when 'All day, F1-11s split | the downs, rehearsing war' (BB, 17). The symbolic perimeter fence between the inside of the base and the outside is mentioned repeatedly, appearing twice in the same poem (BB, 22), then three more times in the same poem, (BB, 32, 34 and 36), once as 'fence-holes' (BB, 54) and as both subject and title of the poem, 'The Fence' (BB, 29). The fence also serves as a source of division ('the wrong side of the wire' BB, 36) and a means of prohibition: 'razor wire' (BB,34) 'rusting razor wire' (BB,54). However, since separation is always a condition of touch in Roberts poetry, the fence also takes on a skin-like function — according to Roberts's understanding of the skin as a meeting point — between geographical areas ('Where broken runway meets the wire' BB, 54) and people ('they picked up a mimic on the other side of the wire' BB, 22). Not all perimeters are figured as physically as the fence however.



The character of Helen begins as a local resident, but by having ‘crossed the line and pitched her tent’ (*BB*, 23), she also crosses the intangible line from resident to protestor. Helen is one of few exceptions: ‘Otherwise, nobody crossed the lines | between USAF, peace camps, locals’ (*BB*, 32). The line between friend and enemy is blurred on a political level too. The Americans are seen as invaders, ‘Are these the first settlers, | toe-hold for a colony?’ (*BB*, 18), and even the natural world seems infected with a sense of territorial expansionism, ‘skylarks stake out | a new empire of the air’ (*BB*, 45).

The territorialism in *Burning Babylon* revolves around a deadly, untouchable centre — the nuclear warheads. One of the explicit uses of the word *touch* comes in the form of a prohibition, when ‘ash from the linings of jet engines’ snows down on a school and ‘Mr Murphy told them not to touch it’ (*BB*, 22). The teacher’s anxiety is derived from the radioactive payload at the centre of the airbase. Anything associated with the airbase becomes suspect and potentially contaminating. Ultimately, as has been evidenced in the case of Melissa Jones and the ‘Stroud Green man’, not even physical contact is necessary in order to feel contaminated. In this sense, the mechanics of contamination in *Burning Babylon* resemble the Freudian taboo by which ‘the prohibition does not apply to immediate physical contact but has an extent as wide as the metaphorical use of the phrase “to come into contact with”’. Contamination in Roberts’s poetry draws attention to the way touch refers to both physical contact, and a ‘state of being mentally “touched”’, a

duality also inherent in the taboo, by which ‘intellectual contact with it, is just as much prohibited as direct physical contact’.<sup>108</sup>

The radioactive material, which is the source of the taboo, is guarded protectively:

“‘DANGER – Razor Wire’, ‘DANGER – Barbed Wire’, | ‘ABSOLUTELY no access ...’”

(BB, 48). However, attention in these signs is always drawn to what protects (‘razor wire’, ‘barbed wire’), never to what is being protected or protected against. The nuclear centre has no sign to signify it, echoing Derrida’s sense that it ‘can only be the signified referent, never the real referent (present or past) of a discourse or a text’.<sup>109</sup> Nor is the arrival of the ‘referent’ ever directly anticipated, as ‘There would be no announcement’ (BB, 20), or heard as it is ‘Hidden in the thunder’ (BB, 20), or even accurately reported, shrouded instead in hearsay as ‘Some claimed the convoy | had passed them in the night’ (BB, 29).

Once the missiles are removed, without a centre, the perimeters and borders so aggressively asserted on the Common no longer hold. The book’s four subdivisions are each introduced by journalistic epigraphs (another genre contamination) describing the land’s geographic restructuring after the airbase is eventually destroyed.<sup>110</sup> The Common, the reader learns, becomes public space once more, living up to its name and its historical provenance as a site of common access:

*‘Stock fencing will be erected to enable the Common to be managed through*

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<sup>108</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. by James Strachey, Routledge Classics (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 32.

<sup>109</sup> Derrida, ‘No Apocalypse, Not Now’, p. 23.

<sup>110</sup> Three of the epigraphs are from ‘Green Ways: Berkshire’s Rights of Way Magazine, Issue No. 4 Summer 1999’ and the final epigraph is from ‘Greenham Common Trust Newsletter, Winter 1999’.

*grazing and there will be numerous public access points'* (BB, 62). This occurs in contrast to the site's military provenance, dating back to the civil war ('Since its ancient civil battles, | this place has seen no blood.' BB, 16). The language of ownership over the Common and the language of the restoration of the Common to nature continue to employ a vocabulary of lines, borders and perimeters, whether it is the '*spring-fed gullies that cut into the ridge*' (BB, 26) or the removal of the 'perimeter fence' (BB, 44). In terms of Cold War militaristic parameters however, interiority and exteriority are exposed to each other irreversibly and 'There is no longer any difference | between outside and in' (BB, 59). This collapse occurs when the threat of contamination is removed, 'When the Cruises were gone, | their tombs were cleaned out' (BB, 56).

The way contamination is instrumental to maintaining the perimeters echoes Mary Douglas's description of the taboo as a means by which to protect 'the local consensus on how the world is organized'. Nobody is physically contaminated at Greenham; however, fear of contamination is rife, because everything surrounding the missiles (the mystery of their arrival, the fact that they cannot be seen or touched) is disturbingly ambiguous, and 'ambiguous things can seem very threatening'. What occurs in the Greenham community then, according to Douglas, is that the 'taboo confronts the ambiguous and shunts it into the category of the sacred', explaining why Cold War tropes in *Burning Babylon* are so frequently figured in religious language.<sup>111</sup> This is demonstrated for instance when the missiles

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<sup>111</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 7.

are removed, and the silos are figured as 'tombs', as the empty tomb touches on the Biblical episode in which Christ's tomb is discovered as being abandoned, a key biblical passage of touch which has been demonstrated repeatedly to underpin Roberts's poetry and conception of touch. Through Douglas, there is also a way of recognising the compulsive behaviours as being part of an inherently socio-religious structure, rather than signs of madness. Douglas writes that 'rituals of purity and impurity create unity in experience' and the 'beliefs in dangerous contagion' in fact coerce people into 'good citizenship'.<sup>112</sup>

Ultimately, in *Burning Babylon*, the attention is more often than not on those characters which demonstrate the instability of these boundaries. These include the 'Stroud Green man', driven to madness, and Melissa Jones who attempts to flee the community altogether. None of them adhere to normative behaviours or notions of good citizenship. Similarly, the protestors of the Women's Peace Camp, who take up residence fully exposed to the perimeter, are the very opposite of good citizens. Instead, all three populate the 'third space between', not against East or West, but against the conflicted binary in its entirety. 'The between' is perhaps finally the source of contamination, as well as its subtextual means of contact, which allows Roberts to rupture 'Cold War skewed polarities' (*BB*, 8). Greenham Common becomes not just a space where Americans and Soviets come to touch, but *through* which they touch. It is also conversely a site which resists this contact, as evidenced in the action of the Greenham women and the local population. In this sense, the

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<sup>112</sup> Douglas, p. 11.

way in which the site of the Common serves as a meeting point as well as a separator of different communities, echoes in Roberts's poetry the Weilean notion of 'metaxu', which I will explore in the final chapter section.

### **'Metaxu': Simone Weil's Touch in *Soft Keys* (1993)**

A broad range of publications, many of them recent, has drawn attention to the influence of the philosophical and theological writings of French thinker and activist Simone Weil on a number of significant modernist and contemporary English-speaking poets, from Wallace Stevens and Eliot to Hill, Heaney and Jorie Graham.<sup>113</sup> Weil was born in Paris in 1909 and died from tuberculosis in an English sanatorium in 1943. She was well-educated, from an affluent family, and known principally for her strong social and religious conscience, which led her to fight in the Spanish Civil War, join the French Resistance and interrupt her teaching career in order to work in a factory to understand better the lives of the working classes. Her later writings are powerfully informed by a spiritual conversion she underwent in her twenties, and she is variously described as a social activist, a philosopher and a Christian mystic. Her most famous writings were published posthumously. A collection of her thoughts or *pensées* were compiled by her friend Gustav Thibon in the book *Gravity and Grace*, in which he uses key Weilean concepts such as 'decreation', 'balance and lever' and 'metaxu' to organise the contents of her notebooks. Weil's influence

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<sup>113</sup> Robert Macfarlane, 'Gravity and Grace in Geoffrey Hill', *Essays in Criticism*, 58 (2008), 237-256; James Lindroth, 'Simone Weil and Wallace Stevens: The Notion of Decreation as Subtext in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven"', *Religion & Literature*, 19 (1987), 43-62; Kit Fan, "'Between the blank page and the poem": Reading Simone Weil in Contemporary American Poets', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 6 (2007), 129-154; John F. Desmond, *Gravity and Grace: Seamus Heaney and the Force of Light* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009).

on contemporary poets is not surprising given the way she herself was influenced by poetry, with the Metaphysical poets and Homer's *Illiad* playing particularly central roles. Between them, the contemporary poets mentioned above draw on a diverse range of Weilean concepts. Roberts's own poetry is marked by the use of Weil's notion of 'metaxu' in particular. Furthermore, Roberts's poetry in turn demonstrates the extent to which 'metaxu' underpins much of Weil's other thinking, and the way this thinking is applied in the work of his contemporaries.

The term 'metaxu' is used by Aristotle in *On the Soul*, when he tries to locate the organ of touch. Aristotle speculates that on the one hand the organ of touch is the flesh itself, but on the other suggests that perhaps 'the flesh is "the medium" [to metaxu] of touch, the real organ being situated farther inward'.<sup>114</sup> In its capacity of linking the organ of touch to the object of touch, the 'metaxu' is both conjunctive and disjunctive. In a very basic sense, Weil's development of the term continues to share this fundamental operation with Aristotle's second proposition on touch. In Weil's writings, a 'metaxu' is something that connects a person to, but at the same time separates them from, God. As Weil summarises 'metaxu' in *Gravity and Grace*, 'every separation is a link'.<sup>115</sup> In Weilean thought, echoing the Hasidic Jewish creation story Roberts uses in *Raising Sparks*, it is necessary for God to withdraw to allow anything else to exist. As a result, according to Weil, 'God can only be present in creation under the form of absence'.<sup>116</sup> In another paradox, physical existence

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<sup>114</sup> Cited by Derrida in *On Touching*, p. 5.

<sup>115</sup> Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. by Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr, Routledge Classics (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 145.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

shuts a person off from God 'the closed door. It is a barrier', while 'at the same time it is the way through'.<sup>117</sup> 'Metaxu' then can be thought of as a bridge between creation and its creator, between the touchable and the untouchable, whereby creation itself is that bridge:

The essence of created things is to be intermediaries. They are intermediaries leading from one to the other and there is no end to this. They are intermediaries leading to God. We have to experience them as such.<sup>118</sup>

The Weilean 'metaxu' is reflected in Roberts's notion of the skin as 'border country' in the poem 'What Divides Us' (C, 41). The skin separates two people from each other, while at the same time being the condition of their touch. As such, the nature of touch in Roberts's poetry parallels the mechanics of Weil's 'metaxu'. Additionally, Roberts's 'metaxu' and the nature of his representations of the figure of Weil herself in the collection *Soft Keys* (1993) reflexively suggest that the text of Roberts's poem itself is a 'metaxu': a 'separation', which is at the same time a 'means of communication'.<sup>119</sup> The poetry is not an end in itself, but an intermediary. The heightened physicality of Roberts's 'metaxu' in turn expands on a contemporary Weilean poetics, which 'insists on the intricate correlation between the body of her texts and the text of her bodily identity'.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., pp. 145-146.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>120</sup> Fan, p. 138.

In interviews, Roberts refers to Weil's writings as having had a significant personal effect on him. The connection between the two writers made by Roberts himself is principally in terms of their shared Catholicism, and particularly their testing and tested relationship with religion:

A lot of my heroes, such as Olivier Messiaen and Simone Weil, were rooted in Catholicism though, to varying degrees, struggled with it. Simone Weil certainly did.<sup>121</sup>

Poetry, particularly that of the Metaphysical poets, also serves as a common ground between Roberts and Weil.<sup>122</sup> Roberts's debt to Metaphysical poets such as Vaughan and Donne and his explicit use of a Metaphysical vocabulary, has been established in Chapters 1 and 2, while Herbert is said to have similarly provided Weil's 'private writing with a new language'.<sup>123</sup> For example, the trope of the prison or prisoners is one used extensively by Metaphysical poets such as Donne and also serves as a touchstone between the works of Weil and Roberts.<sup>124</sup> Weil uses it to illustrate the notion of 'metaxu' when she writes the following *pensée*:

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<sup>121</sup> Day, 'In Conversation', p. 53.

<sup>122</sup> See Diogenes Allen, 'George Herbert and Simone Weil', *Religion & Literature*, 17 (1985), 17-34; Joan Dargan, *Simone Weil: Thinking Poetically* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 52.

<sup>123</sup> Simone Weil, *An Anthology*, ed. by Siân Miles (London: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 35.

<sup>124</sup> See for instance in Donne (*JD*) p.42 (ll. 17-20), p.55 (l. 78), p.179 (l. 67), p.185 (l. 241), p.189 (l. 371), p.295 (l. 249), and also Vaughan, p.99 (l. 16).



Two prisoners whose cells adjoin communicate with each other by knocking on the wall.

The wall is the thing which separates them but it is also their means of communication. It is the same with us and God. Every separation is a link.<sup>125</sup>

Roberts uses the same imagery in his poem 'Tongue' (C, 52-53), when he writes that 'Even people talk now, | | knocking out a morse code on | the walls between their cells'. He concludes that 'What separates them is their | only means of contact'. These lines are not simply an echoing, but a compounding of Weil's 'metaxu'. The word 'only' postulates that 'metaxu' is not simply an option, but a condition of being able to use language and, by implication, poetry. However, since the 'wall' is a linguistic figure in a poem, there is an extent to which language (and the poem made of language itself) is the 'metaxu'. The important contact lies not in the contact with the actual poem (its physical texture made up of sight and sound), but with that which is beyond it on the other side, and which is making itself felt through the poem. This is borne out by Weil's concept of 'reading', which is preoccupied with avoiding a position in which 'one believes one is reading what is written in front of one's eyes'.<sup>126</sup> One example Weil gives of 'reading' is the miser to whom 'the quality of desirability belongs to gold as such, and not to its exchange value'.<sup>127</sup> In terms of touch, her *pensées* evidence the same mechanics in the way emphasis is placed not on the contact with what is felt immediately, but on the contact with a presence beyond that:

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<sup>125</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 145.

<sup>126</sup> Weil cited in Dargan, p. 18.

<sup>127</sup> Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, trans. by Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 73.

The handshake of a friend on meeting again after a long absence. I do not even notice whether it gives me pleasure or pain to my sense of touch: like the blind man who feels the objects directly at the end of his stick, I feel the presence of my friend directly. It is the same with life's circumstances, whatever they may be, and God.<sup>128</sup>

Eliot uses the same language to describe the experience of reading Weil's writings in his introduction to *The Need for Roots*, when he writes that 'agreement and rejection are secondary: What matters is to make contact with a great soul'.<sup>129</sup> In the following section I will illustrate the way this particular form of Weilean contact occurs in Roberts's poetry, especially the poem 'The Botanical Gardens', the sequence 'Simone and the Unknown Friend ('I Video Games with Simone Weil', 'II Front-Line Nurses', 'III Apple Fool, April Fool', 'IV Simone's Last and First'), and the title poem 'Soft Keys' from the same collection.

The poem 'Tongue' figures 'metaxu' by using the same tropes as those Weil uses in her own writings. The poem 'The Botanical Gardens' (SK, 4) demonstrates the same mechanics but applied to different imagery. In the poem, the speaker stands at a pair of gates. In the grounds on the other side, the signs of winter are widely evident: 'The beds are black. | The shrubs are sprung like wire traps.' However, at the heart of the estate the glasshouse, which still 'keeps its insides | green. Water runs like a brass rail | through it, air too rich to breath.' The language of interiority

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<sup>128</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 24.

<sup>129</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'Preface', in Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots*, trans. by Arthur Wills, Routledge Classics (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. vi.

and exteriority makes itself felt in the way the glasshouse represents a vibrant, vivacious interior, compared with the grim, wintery exterior of its surroundings, such as ‘the vanilla-painted ice-cream, house | being licked dirty by the rain.’ This Edenic interior is untouchable, locked behind ‘scrollwork gates’. However, a Weilean interpretation suggests that the speaker of the poem and their Eden not only touch each other, but that it is precisely the prohibitive gates which facilitate their contact. ‘Our gloves have frozen to the gates’ the speaker says, and ‘All we can see of the glasshouse | is a jet of smoke from across the lake’. Even though this is all they can see, there is nevertheless a strong sense that contact with the place has been made. This is established in previous lines, which describe even the act of breathing in palpable terms (‘air too rich to breathe’). When Weil writes, ‘Let the whole universe be for me, in relation to my body, what the stick of the blind man is in relation to his hand’, she is setting out the mechanics of touch in the poem.<sup>130</sup>

The subjects in ‘The Botanical Gardens’ are also in a sense ‘blind’ as ‘All we can see of the glasshouse | is a jet of smoke from across the lake’. However, with their hands on the gate, which separates them from the glasshouse, the gate functions as Weil’s ‘stick of the blind man’, allowing the speaker to feel the untouchable Eden or spiritual interior through them, on the other side.

In *Soft Keys*, Weil features as the explicit subject of the extended poem sequence, ‘Simone and the Unknown Friend’ (*SK*, 31), a four-part poem which features reimaginings around biographical details of her life, alongside scenes rooted more

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<sup>130</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 141.

obviously in fantasy. Unlike the others, the first part 'I Video Games with Simone Weil', for instance, does not draw on biography at all, as Weil finds herself 'in a crappy arcade in Torquay out of season, | slowly getting hooked'. Even though the scene is comical in its juxtaposition of the serious figure of Weil and a children's computer game, it also plays on certain common representations of Weil as ascetic and overworked: 'Simone, thin as a marble sculpture | pared too far' (31). The sense of her 'willing slavery' in the arcade simulates the 'willing slavery' she showed throughout her life. Weil took leave from her role as a teacher to work under harsh conditions on minimal pay in various factories, which led to the experience of a gradual stripping away of a sense of self. Weil would describe this under the overlapping terms of 'detachment' and 'decreation', by which she felt impelled 'To take the form of a slave' and 'to strip' herself 'of the imaginary royalty of the world. Absolute solitude. Then we possess the truth of the world'.<sup>131</sup>

However, the description of Weil in the arcade and the connection to manual labour also stage the notion of 'metaxu'. After describing her eyes as 'Myopic, straining at the screen through pinched | round lenses', the focus shifts to the hands: 'smooth fingers on the joystick | and fire button' (31). The smoothness of the hands is a reference to the material she is working with, the sleek plastic levers and buttons of an arcade game, rather than the heavy machinery she used in her real life in factories, and which so often resulted in 'burns, cuts and abscesses'.<sup>132</sup> Curiously, Roberts's description elides a stand-out fact about Weil's hands, which is

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>132</sup> Weil, *An Anthology*, p. 22.

that they were too small in proportion to her body and that she experienced great difficulty using them. They were frequently swollen and painful so that throughout her life even the act of writing was slow and laborious.<sup>133</sup> Francoise Meltzer describes how Weil's 'inept hands and crushing migraines got her consistently fired'.<sup>134</sup> In this sense, the notion of Weil at an arcade game, even if it is imaginary, seems cruel. However, the way the hand is emphasised in the poem also means it becomes a particularly strong symbol of Weil's physicality in contrast to the metaphysicality of the world of computer games. Meltzer argues that 'the hand mimes the move in Weil from thought to action' in terms of her manual labour and in terms of her writing. In fact, Meltzer goes so far as to write that 'The hand, for Weil, is a *metaxu* — both an obstacle and a way to truth'.<sup>135</sup> In the poem, too, the hand is a 'metaxu' as the physical hand gives way to the metaphysical game. Furthermore, Roberts seems to be drawing a line between the virtual labour of the computer game — and by extension the increase in an office-based, computerised workforce — and the traditional, industrial manual labour performed by Weil, which she relies on for her notion of 'decreation'.

The use of the hand as the 'metaxu' between physical and metaphysical, thought and action, is a trope which Roberts develops in other poems, such as the title poem of the collection *Soft Keys*. Two key representations of touch in the title poem occur in the third and fifth verses, both of which can be understood as

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>134</sup> Francoise Meltzer, 'The Hands of Simone Weil', *Critical Inquiry*, 27 (2001), 611-628 (p. 623).

<sup>135</sup> Meltzer, p. 624.

‘metaxu’. ‘Soft Keys’ is structured along a chiastic scheme of half-rhymes (ABCD CBA) of which the end-word of the fourth line (D) serves as a kind of ‘keystone’ to the stanza, (echoing the use of the word ‘keystone’ in the first verse). The ‘keystone’ of the third verse, the central verse of this five-verse poem, is ‘heaven’, structurally the most central word of the poem. The crossover action of the chiastic rhyme scheme also contributes to a sense that the form itself is somehow a series of contact points:

As we praise the timing of the quartz,  
the keys to praise are held by birds  
who scutter over their majors and minors  
for he who unlocks hell and heaven.  
The key to those binary soft ons and offs  
of a computer is a single finger’s  
weight which teeters on the edge of thought,

The introduction of time in the first line draws attention to rhythm in the poem, but also to the fact that touch, any touch, is a process subject to chronological sequencing. The iambic pattern ‘scutters’ a little in line three over its ‘majors and minors’, and takes on a dactylic rhythm in lines five and six, but always finds its ground again, particularly in the enjambment ‘a single finger’s | weight which teeters on the edge of thought’. As has already been suggested (see Introduction), this line is also the point at which the poem attempts to map the chronological sequence through which a letter travels from the interior of a person to their exterior, from thought into action. The physical weight of the finger is poised,

touching a computer key, waiting for the connection between thought and finger to become realised. At the same time, the word *thought* ‘teeters’ on the edge of the line. The next verse picks up the thread with ‘the edge of a letter being born — it was’. However, the moment of touch, the actual point at which the thought becomes externalised is never specified, but represented instead by a dash. The poem elides the moment of contact between ‘thought’ and ‘action’. The letter goes from its potential (‘the edge of thought, | the edge of a letter being born’) to its realisation (‘it was’), without the exact moment of contact being pinpointed. This demonstrates that representations of touch are not only identifiable through tactile language, but that they also occur between lines and words, in the dash, in the blank spaces of the page, all of which function as ‘metaxu’. This is particularly clear in the case of the line break, which when written out, resembles Weil’s own prison wall ‘|’, and is further evidenced by the final verse:

So scratch some grooves into a wall  
to make the final coat of plaster stick,  
then pick up all these keys and try  
the softest that like skeletons can open  
anything, but with much greater secrecy,  
so all out locks are really ready-picked  
and we just have to use the handles.

The ‘keystone’ in this verse is the word ‘open’, and by ending on the line ‘and we just have to use the handles’, the reader is encouraged to open a door out of the poem. In terms of ‘metaxu’, the final word ‘handles’ carries the reader’s attention

out of the locked interior of the poem's language, towards an exterior, somewhere beyond language, which cannot be accurately conveyed in words, only through them. The idea of the dash as a letter in morse code (the letter *t*) further upholds the connection to Roberts's own poetic figurations of Weil's prisoners communicating through the wall, tapping out their language, and the idea of language as 'metaxu'.

The second poem in the sequence 'Simone and the Unknown Friend', 'Il Front-Line Nurses', alludes to a plan of Weil's drawn up during the Second World War, based on her conviction that the 'symbolic presence of women in the front-line would be incalculably powerful'.<sup>136</sup> In the poem, Weil's brother describes his sister's mind as being 'like a mite | of plaster that can burst a great clay vessel | in the kiln.' The image of the clay vessel is exemplary of Roberts's repeated thinking on interiority and exteriority, which always emphasises the space 'between' the two, and as such the 'wall' of the clay vessel can be understood as another example of 'metaxu'. However, in this case the poem, as well as staging 'the between' as a site of communication, also stages it as a site of destruction and interruption. 'Metaxu', as shown in Meltzer's analysis of the hands, is always a genuine obstacle and as such potentially a site of violence and suffering. This is echoed later on in the poem, when on board a ferry 'Simone is showered only by the rain and sea all night'. Here, the weather cannot be defended against, and the 'Tarpaulin cannot protect her from these elements' (SK,33). Instead, in a very Weilean sense, the subject must

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<sup>136</sup> Weil, *An Anthology*, p. 39.



give herself up to something larger. This sense of a 'decreation' is further exemplified in the fourth part:

I saw a woman at dinner tonight cut open a fish  
with her silver knife held in a white kid glove.  
I have always held fish as a symbol of the faith  
but she showed me, pressing out eggs with the blade  
(many victims within one body) and forking them  
into her mouth, that symbols are not to be trusted.  
They blush and give themselves to any sweet-talker. (SK,33)

This passage describes the act of 'decreation' by which the woman in the poem and the speaking subject 'empty ourselves of the false divinity with which we were born'.<sup>137</sup> The signature word 'cut' (SK, 5, 6, 15, 26, 30, 33, 38 and 50) begins the fish's dissection in this passage, the organ of touch metonymically referenced in the glove as both pure ('white') and infanticidal ('kid'). The eggs are 'pressed out' and 'fork[ed]', and the fish, which 'I have always held [...] as a symbol of the faith' systematically 'decreated' through the language of touch. This act of 'decreation' is however also a form of 'metaxu', by which the necessary suffering is both the separation and the link to God, as it is only through the decreated self, 'In so far as I become nothing', that 'God loves himself through me'.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 34.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

In the same way that 'decreation' can be thought of as a form of 'metaxu', so other Weilean concepts reveal themselves to be underpinned by the same mechanics. Kit Fan's criticism of three contemporary poets (Stephanie Strickland, Fanny Howe and Jorie Graham) allows for a broad sense of 'metaxu' to develop. He considers for instance that Heaney's Weilean notion of the 'counter-weight' in *The Redress of Poetry* is itself 'a form of *metaxu*'.<sup>139</sup> Macfarlane in his discussion of 'gravity' and 'grace' in the work of Hill also identifies 'metaxu' as a way to 'grace': 'passing through the known to reach the unknown'.<sup>140</sup> The languages of 'gravity', 'grace' and 'counterweighting' are related to each other in Weil's *pensées*, when she writes that 'Creation is composed of the descending movement of gravity, the ascending movement of grace and the descending movement of the second degree of grace'.<sup>141</sup> As Heaney writes, her writing is always a writing of 'counterweighting, of balancing out the forces'.<sup>142</sup> The role 'metaxu' plays in 'counterweighting' is by thinking of it as the fulcrum or the axis on a set of scales. The fulcrum is the part of a set of scales on which the beam to which the weights are attached pivots. In the same way, the 'metaxu' is 'the between' through which all balancing takes place, and as 'the between', it is the natural place for Roberts's attention to fall. If 'grace' is what Weil defines in a more complete sense as 'the grace of real and direct contact with God', then the physical world of gravity is the 'metaxu' by which contact to the metaphysical, untouchable world of grace is made.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Fan, p. 136.

<sup>140</sup> Macfarlane, 'Gravity and Grace', p. 241.

<sup>141</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 4.

<sup>142</sup> Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995), p. 3.

<sup>143</sup> Weil, *An Anthology*, p. 94.

This is echoed in the figuration of Weil in Roberts's poem as her boat is about to leave for England and her parents explain that, 'Like a little boat bobs and tugs | at its mooring she did and did not want to let us go' (*SK*, 32). The language of touch, 'tugs', finds itself accentuated by being placed at the end of the line again, matched in the line below by 'let us go'. Desire and longing in this poem find themselves offset against each other, 'gravity' one way (the comfort of home) and 'grace' (distance, difficulty) the other. Similar themes are developed in the third part of 'Simone and the Unknown Friend', 'Ill Apple Fool, April Fool', which deals with her gradual 'wasting away' (*SK*, 32) towards death, a movement of 'decreation' foreshadowed by a curiously pagan encounter with 'a figure swinging | from the gibbet'. Here, death is to an extent demonstrated as being a 'metaxu', and the means of the hanged man's death and separation from life become the very instrument of his poetic protest: 'I could see his feet, toecaps tapping, | trace incriminating letters on the grass'. This 'metaxu' also evidences the language of 'gravity' in the figure's 'downstaring ache to be underground'.

In the poem 'Vanishing Point' (*SK*, 24), it is possible to identify a further interplay between the Weilean language of 'counterweighting' and 'metaxu'. In the poem, gravity 'pulls at our feet' in a downward motion, but the subjects 'step | up from the ground and float', they fly through the air in pursuit of the elusive vanishing point, 'unwatchable' but also untouchable. The poem concludes with 'the motion | of bodies in glory', the 'bodies' in this expression providing the downward pull of

the corporeal, while the notion of 'glory' suggests an upward movement of 'grace'. However, as Weil writes, there is a third movement, the 'descending movement of the second degree of grace'. Roberts cites the word 'grace' in an interview, as an example of a religious language which has been 'stripped of meaning now in the wider culture'. 'Grace' in particular, Roberts says, 'if anything now just means a beautiful way of moving physically' and has lost its other inflections.<sup>144</sup> One of these inflections is the notion of 'grace' as put forward by Weil, who describes it as follows in one of her *pensées* (Miles, 5):

To come down by a movement in which gravity plays no part. ... Gravity makes things come down, wings make them rise: what wings raised to the second power can make things come down without weight?<sup>145</sup>

The way this links to 'metaxu' is as follows. If the first movement of grace in the poem is represented by the bodies' ascension, then the downward movement to the 'second degree of grace', a 'coming down without weight' does not occur in the poem. Roberts's poem in this sense does not seem to be a direct reflection of Weilean philosophy, even if his poetic explorations occur within the field of her thinking. It indicates that a poetry such as his, which is so conspicuously marked by the language of touch, shows too much of an 'Obedience to the force of gravity. The greatest sin', and cannot achieve 'grace'.<sup>146</sup> Even when flying, the subjects in 'Vanishing Point' express the experience in a language of touch and resistance, 'like

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<sup>144</sup> Day, 'In Conversation', p. 55.

<sup>145</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 4.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

a swim in syrup for a fruit | fly', 'sky like ocean'. However, it is precisely this textual resistance which reveals the poem as a 'metaxu', an obstacle, and that the notion of 'grace' cannot really occur on the page at all, but must occur beyond it.

The way Roberts's poetry indicates beyond itself is finally also evidenced in his staging of Weil's first and last moments. Fan identifies 'metaxu' mostly for its quality of 'precarious in-betweenness', going so far as to position Weil herself as a figure of 'metaxu': 'situated between anorexic delusion and mystic activism, between French patriotism and anti-Semitism, between devotion to Christianity and scepticism about baptism'.<sup>147</sup> The title of the fourth poem in the Weil sequence, 'IV Simone's Last and First', similarly situates Weil not only in 'the between', but as 'the between'. The poem speculates on the first thing ('the flaky | ceiling of your parents' Boulevard de Strasbourg home') and last thing ('the ivory | glint from an August afternoon on a drip-marked | sink in the sanatorium') Weil sees in her life. The sense of touch is associated principally with birth: 'a streak of light that tempted you, pulled | you into the huge, firm hands' (*SK*, 35). The moment of death though is linked to the untouchable. Again, the physicality of her life is a 'metaxu', which separates her from but ultimately connects her to the 'light': 'All we see is a lit taper, as much as we can take, | before light gobsmacks open.' Once more, Roberts's poem reveals itself to be a 'metaxu', as the final word 'open' guides the reader in the direction of what lies beyond the text.

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<sup>147</sup> Fan, pp. 129-130.

Having established the way in which 'metaxu' has centrally underpinned Roberts's poetics since his first collection *Soft Keys*, it is possible to recognise evidence of 'metaxu' retrospectively in other examples of touching the untouchable too. In *Burning Babylon*, the Common serves as a space that both separates and connects warring forces. Other evidence includes Melissa Jones's dream, in which the newspaper text both connects and separates her from the radioactive material it contains, and which comes to represent contaminative reading processes across the collection as a whole. In terms of care, care itself is a 'metaxu', as care towards the dead in Roberts's poetry is marked by both loving attention as well as a series of necessary precautions and emotional restraints. Tactile care is a contact maintained through careful, metaxu-like distances. In another context, distance also forms the 'metaxu' in the case of 'Last Words', separating and connecting the spectator from the event, like the TV screen in Nurske's poem. The answerphone message and the poem as answerphone message function similarly, inviting the reader to trespass, but ultimately distancing them at the last moment.

Looking further back to Chapter 2, the 'edgelands' might also be thought of as a 'metaxu', separating and connecting urban and rural spaces. The conceit, earlier in the same chapter, in turn demonstrates the way in which ideas harnessed together must retain a degree of disjunction in order to sustain and not exhaust their meaningfulness. Finally, the binaries in Chapter 1 demonstrate the same mechanics, in which the shell functions so often as 'metaxu' to the spark, and the machine as 'metaxu' to the ghost. In *Drysalter*, the speaker describes the way in which 'There is no way to the soul | but through the body.' (*DS*, 27). The reading of

Roberts's poetics as repeatedly staging Weilean 'metaxu' makes a strong suggestion in terms of his incarnational poetics. Rather than embodying ideas in the physical, the physical serves as a 'metaxu' through which to feel the metaphysical. This thesis has demonstrated in more ways than one that to touch the untouchable in Roberts's poetry, and even to touch in general, is always to touch-through. *I touch you. I touches you* through *touch*. The poetics of touch in Roberts's poetry is not a poetics of shell or spark, body or soul, ghost or machine, touchable or untouchable, or even both — it is principally a poetics of 'the between'.

In this thesis, the initial investigation into the poetics of touch in Roberts's poetry gradually reveals the central structuring principle in his writing to be a preoccupation with 'the between'. In his repeated stagings of binaries between physical and metaphysical polarities, it becomes conspicuous that the emphasis in Roberts's poetry is not so much on the points in the binaries themselves, but on the movement performed from one constellation to the other. Once isolated, the space between the two poles in an individual binary — shell-spark, ghost-machine, body-soul — also reveals itself to be a movement of sorts, or at least a space that is productive of movements. These movements include the exhaustive reaching towards the limit of the conceit, the irritable resistance against overly clear delineation in 'edgelands', and the production of the lyric subject. In fact, in this thesis a whole series of touches in Roberts's poetry are shown to pivot on a between-space or movement, revealing how in Roberts's poetry to touch is always to touch-through — from the 'voice-print' to the Weilean 'metaxu'.

The extent of the importance of 'the between' in Roberts's poetry is further evidenced in the way his poetry repeatedly situates itself in 'the between'.

Roberts's poetry consistently distances itself from absolute, polarised positions and opinions in terms of its poetic voice. The thesis introduction describes how a quality of doubt allows for Roberts's poetry to follow an exploratory rather than dogmatic approach in respect to questions of faith. The way in which Roberts's poetic voice is identified for its sense of uncertainty by other critics supports this. Examples include the preference for 'gestures towards possible forms of thought, rather than thumping statement' documented by Sampson,<sup>148</sup> and the value placed on 'poetry's unknowability' articulated by Day.<sup>149</sup> In the poem 'Hosea Thomas in the Realm of Miracles', this sense of doubt is identified with a metaphysical between-space 'a gap | between himself and God' which, in turn, mirrors the physical 'gap between his house and the railway' (SK, 20). These two examples of 'the between' are prized by Hosea Thomas for the way in which 'both gaps gave him space to grow, | | think things through, find his own way' (SK, 20). Hosea Thomas's 'gap' is analogous with 'the between' in Roberts's poetry as a whole, whether recognisable as 1) 'edgelands', the limit or 'metaxu', 2) in the 'doubtful' tone and position of his speaker, or 3) in the way his poems themselves act as a space in which the poet can be explorative ('think things through, find his own way') and let his own poems come to 'surprise' him (see Introduction).

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<sup>148</sup> Sampson, *Beyond the Lyric*, p. 153.

<sup>149</sup> Day, 'Food for Thought', p. 38.



In the poem 'Cosmology', Roberts's amplifies the significance of 'the between' in his writing by playing the movement out on a galactic scale:

#### COSMOLOGY

Hold tight, for the world

is at full tilt tonight,

clocks cannot keep pace.

Solar systems scream asunder,

star clouds are a powder blast

of ancient light.

Hold fast to me, because

the universe is one long

shrapnel burst, out and away

from the heart. Up there,

the only contacts are collisions

of stars as they fly apart.

Or maybe stars are still,

like us, and it's the space

between them which explodes. (C, 63)

Particularly the last two verses, with their 'contacts' and 'collisions | of stars as they fly apart', suggest something of what is at stake in the language of touch in Roberts's poetry and its underlying negotiation of 'the between'. At first, Roberts portrays a conventional perspective of stars colliding, even if it is complicated by the fact that it is a paradoxical coming together ('contacts') of 'stars as they fly apart'. Nevertheless, it is the stars that move. The final stanza introduces the position of doubt, typical of Roberts's poetry, through the use of the conditional 'Or maybe'. As with the key binary tropes in Roberts's work, which move the emphasis from the urban and rural to the 'edgelands' for instance, the attention shifts from the moving stars which are static and 'still' to 'the space | between them which explodes'.

This attention on the productive force of 'the between' is not limited to the movement of heavenly bodies, but also becomes true of relations between subjects 'like us'. In 'Cosmology', 'the between' is invested with all the vitality and dynamism that drives the universe, revealing it as a universal structuring principle. In a highly Metaphysical gesture, Roberts presents this on both a macroscopic, planetary level as well as a personal one. The emphasis on inter-subjective movement played out in the stars echoes the conditional proposition ('if', 'would') in 'Soul Song (II)' in which 'the countless pinprick points of light | that make us human [...]' are external

to our bodies and 'your filigree of sparks' comes to 'cloud | and cross with mine' (*DS*, 107). A similar attention to 'the between' constituting a form of exchange is the 'epistemology of touch' in 'Mapping the Genome (I)', in which the 'bodily soul' is constituted through the give-and-take of touch and language between two people ('the soft consonant of wet lips'). All three poems situate 'the between' not simply as a place of mediation, but as constituted by and constituting of two subjects. Above all, 'the between' is privileged over whatever it is that surrounds it, whether it is stars or people. Furthermore, as this thesis reaches its conclusion, the privileging of 'the between' reveals itself to be perhaps the determining characteristic of Roberts's poetry as a whole.

## CONCLUSION

The conclusion to this thesis forms a 'metaxu'. It is not simply the completion of the close reading of Roberts's poetry. It also marks the limit or the edge of the whole project. As a 'metaxu', this limit is the point at which the thesis begins to indicate beyond itself. The central research question asked what is at stake in Roberts's use of the language of touch and what it speaks to in terms of the broader contemporary milieu and contemporary poetry in particular. The thesis considered in detail the implications of the categorisation of Roberts's poetry as a metaphysical poetry of the twenty-first century, and sought to establish the extent to which the language of touch bridges diverse religious and secular experiences in an attempt to establish a common ground between them. In this conclusion, I will readdress those questions in light of Roberts's emphasis on 'the between', which I will identify as evidence of a metaxical principle at work across his poetry. Finally, I will outline possible directions for future scholarship on Roberts's poetry and on twenty-first-century metaphysical poetry more generally.

The introduction to this thesis demonstrates that peer-reviewed criticism of Roberts's poetry by Michelis (2010) and Luft (2010) has so far concentrated almost exclusively on the collection *Corpus* and the trope of the body. This thesis surveys all of Roberts's poetry collections and demonstrates the centrality of other tropes including the soul, the ghost and the machine, and the shell and the spark. By expanding on the discussion of the body and its relation to the soul, and by relating it to the other constellations previously mentioned, this thesis reveals the way in

which physical and metaphysical correlatives are figured in various, often contradictory, arrangements in Roberts's poetry and that as a result, attention is drawn repeatedly to what has been termed 'the between'.

'The between' is associated with a number of different tropes in Roberts's work from Greenham Common to the figure of the corpse. In the final chapter, the Weilean 'metaxu' is recognised as another such example of 'the between'. The analysis of the 'metaxu' in Roberts's poetry demonstrates the way in which to touch is always to touch-*through*. Retrospectively however, one can recognise the same metaxical principle at work in the other examples of 'the between' — from the answerphone message which both separates and connects living and dead loved ones to the 'edgelands' in which urban and rural spaces come to touch. As far as 'the between' is concerned, it is in Roberts's poetry always a form of 'metaxu', and by reading 'the between' in this thesis *as* 'metaxu', one can begin to understand more clearly the way in which Roberts's poetry answers the question of 'how to touch upon the untouchable'.

In every instance of the 'metaxu' in Roberts's poetry, it opens onto the untouchable in two ways. In the first place, touch always depends on an element of the untouchable as part of its metaxical composition. In Derrida's reading of Nancy, his notion of the 'law of tact' is 'precisely' characterised by a between-like 'spacing, a hiatus at the core of contact'.<sup>1</sup> A parallel can be recognised in Roberts's own words,

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. by Christine Irizarry (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 70.

when he writes that 'Skin is border country. | Ever exiled from each other, | we come here to meet' (C, 41). The 'border country' functions like the Derridean 'hiatus': it is a metaxical necessity that makes touch possible, acting simultaneously as both division and conjunction between two things. It is also the condition on which a touching of the untouchable is predicated. The untouchable can be radioactive material, an absent loved one, the soul or the divine. However, to touch on any of these, a 'metaxu' in the form of something like a wire fence, answerphone message or the body always has to be in place first. While Nancy writes that 'the untouchable is the fact that it touches' in Roberts's poetry the two do not inhabit each other in the same way.<sup>2</sup> The separation between the touchable and untouchable must remain in order for a powerful, concrete symbol such as those listed above to be able to act on behalf of 'the sort of language that opens on to the metaphysical, rather than shutting it down'.<sup>3</sup>

The term metaphysical speaks to the way in which the untouchable correlatives Roberts's poetry sets up in relation to physical aspects of a binary are engaged with the concerns of Metaphysical poetry and metaphysical philosophy. What reconciles the two is that the question of how to touch the untouchable is a driving concern of both. This thesis demonstrated extensively the way in which Roberts's use of the shell is a development of Metaphysical tropes in which the prison and the body-as-prison frustratingly separate the speaking subject of the poems from the divine. In

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<sup>2</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, 'On the Soul', in Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. by Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 135.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Symmons Roberts, 'Poetry in a Post-Secular Age', *Poetry Review*, 98 (2008), 69-75 (p. 698).

Chapter 2, the conceit is explored at great length as the technical expression of a similar concern in which two ideas that should not properly be brought into contact are, and ‘the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together’.<sup>4</sup> Cartesian metaphysics in turn attempt to negotiate the interaction of the body (touchable) and the mind (untouchable). The contemporary rehabilitation of this question in poetry, philosophy and to certain extent theology has in all cases coincided with a recognition of the centrality of ‘the between’. This is evidenced in the way Roberts effectively stages Nancy’s suggestion that ‘what we so often designate Cartesian “dualism” can therefore be understood as [...] an ontology of the “between”’.<sup>5</sup> In theological terms too, Roberts’s preoccupation with ‘the between’ of body and soul was shown to echo Rowan Williams’s ‘attempt to write into and around the gaps, the fractures, the silence’ (see Chapter 1). As such, Roberts’s poetry demonstrates itself to be a contemporary metaxical writing which parallels comparable concerns in contemporary theological and philosophical discourses.

Mackenzie identifies as a consolidating quality of the seventeenth-century Metaphysical poets the ‘extravagant’ nature of their poetry. He uses the word in reference to both the extravagance of their technique, as well as in reference to their key concerns. Mackenzie draws on the word’s etymological provenance and its connotation of something ‘that wanders out of bounds; straying, roaming, vagrant’ (*OED*). For Mackenzie, Metaphysical poetry ‘commonly crosses boundaries,

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<sup>4</sup> Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the English Poets: A Selection* (London: Dent, 1975), p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. by Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 143.

disrupts expectations, snatches at attention by its strangeness, most obviously the strangeness of its similes when simile is pushed over into conceit'.<sup>6</sup> Chapter 2 identified how Donne's poetry in particular was written against the background of an epistemological shift in worldview, which rendered the familiar strange: 'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone' (*JD*, 276). This in turn is analogous with Roberts's negotiation of discoveries in genetic science. However, while the Metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century might be said to cross boundaries, Roberts's poetry has been shown to inhabit that boundary space. This is usefully illuminated by William Desmond's complementary work in the area. Roberts's poetry is connected to Desmond's writing principally through its development of the notion of 'metaxu' into a *metaxological* thinking — although Desmond takes the concept from a passing use in Plato rather than Roberts's use of Weil. Desmond, through his engagement with metaphysical philosophy and theology, resonates strongly with Roberts's poetry, in the way that 'the between' is figured in his writing as something experiential. Desmond writes that

Metaphysical thinking is precipitated in the between. We find ourselves in the midst of beings. At first, we do not know our beginning; for we have already begun, before we begin to know that we are, and that there are beings, and that we are in the middle of things. Nor do we know at first what it means to be in this middle, or what makes it be a middle at all. Being between troubles us.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Donald Mackenzie, *The Metaphysical Poets: An Introduction to the Variety of Criticism* (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 115.

<sup>7</sup> William Desmond, *Being and the Between* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 5-6.



Roberts's poetry too is 'precipitated in the between'. From the irritability of the subject in the 'edgelands' to the obsessive compulsive responses of people repeatedly positioned at the limit of their existence during the Cold War, the troubling, contemporary quality of existing in 'the between' is borne out across Roberts's poetry. However, despite its troubling quality, 'the between' repeatedly demonstrates itself to be instrumental to Roberts's poetry, and not something it can or wants to extricate itself from. To a certain extent Roberts's poetry demands to be read as a 'metaxu', a way of speaking to the contemporary situation (of poetry in particular) which is so problematized by the intangible and 'fugitive nature of the present moment'.<sup>8</sup>

The identification of Roberts's staging of 'metaxu' as symptomatic of certain concerns at the centre of contemporary poetry exposes his engagement with the tradition of Metaphysical poetry to be among other things a progressively evolving understanding of 'the between'. For instance, in Donne's 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning' the distance between two separated souls is described not as 'A breach, but an expansion, | Like gold to aery thinness beat' (JD, 84). What would constitute 'the between' in Roberts's poetry — the distance between the two souls — is here non-existent, as Donne suggests that no separation ('breach') has actually taken place. Following the Donne-Eliot-Roberts trajectory already established in this

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Robinson, 'Introduction: The Limits and Openness of the Contemporary', in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Poetry*, ed. by Peter Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 1-17 (p. 3).

thesis further, Eliot's conception of 'the between' in a poem like 'The Hollow Men' is also not a site of productivity as in Roberts's poetry, but precisely the point at which productivity shows its potential to stall. In Eliot's poem, 'Between the idea | And the reality' or 'Between the potency | And the existence', repeatedly 'Falls the Shadow'.<sup>9</sup> This is in contrast to 'the between' as figured in a poem like 'Soft Keys' by Roberts, in which the space between thought and action, between physical and metaphysical, is emphasised as the condition against which touching on the untouchable occurs. In this poem, 'a single finger's | weight which teeters on the edge of thought' is shown to depend on the fulcrum of the line break to tip the balance of the one into the other. The development of 'the between' from Donne to Roberts via Eliot is one of negation to affirmation. While in Donne's poem 'the between' is assimilated to the point of non-existence, in 'Soft Keys' and other poems, it reveals itself to be a fundamental condition of poetry and writing more generally. In this sense, what the conclusion demonstrates is that through the revival of the metaphysical by way of Roberts's poetry, twenty-first-century metaphysical poetry becomes reflective of a contemporary sense of philosophical and poetic 'in-between-ness'. It speaks in particular to a poetry which is hopeful of the possibility of a post-secular negotiation in a fractured society between a wide-range of divergent human experiences from the religious to the secular and which repeatedly attempts to identify a 'common ground' through which these experiences can make productive contact, from the body to emergent scientific discoveries and vocabulary.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> T.S. Eliot, *T.S. Eliot: Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), pp. 69-70.

<sup>10</sup> Roberts, 'Poetry in a Post-Secular Age', p.72.

The extent to which Roberts's poetics of 'the between' resonate with the wider intellectual milieu is a key avenue for future scholarship to explore. Of particular note is the way the figure of the angel in the work of Michel Serres corresponds with similar figurations of the messenger in Roberts's poetry. Serres's *Angels: A Modern Myths* is constructed as a dialog between the characters of Pia and Pantope, so that the mode of Serres's inquiry is already underscored by a sense of 'the between'. Early in the conversation Pia says

I see angels — which, incidentally, in case you didn't know, comes from the ancient Greek word for messengers. Take a good look around, air hostesses and pilots; radio messages; all the air crew just flown in from Tokyo, and just about to leave for Rio; those dozen aircraft neatly lined up, wing to wing on the runway, as they wait to take off; yellow postal vans delivering parcels, packets and telegrams; [...] passengers crossing paths with each other and hurrying for taxis and shuttles while escalators move silently and endlessly up and down ... like the ladder in Jacob's dream ... Don't you see — what we have here is angels of steel, carrying angels of flesh and blood, who in turn send angel signals across the air waves ...<sup>11</sup>

The same proliferation of 'angels' is also evident in Roberts's poetry. In the first place, Roberts's portrays angels explicitly in poems such as 'Angel of the Perfumes' (*SK*, 1) and 'Hosea Thomas in the Realm of Miracles', which specifically figures angels in their capacity as 'go-between' (*SK*, 21). However, the broader sense of Serres's angels and 'angel signals' also finds a thematic echo in Roberts's work.

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<sup>11</sup> Michel Serres, *Angels: A Modern Myth*, trans. by Francis Cowper (Paris and New York: Flammarion, 1993), p. 8.

Serres's 'air waves' are evidenced in the 'white noise of 'Last Words — IX' for instance. In poems such as 'The Telex', telecommunications are portrayed which function specifically as an angelic communication with the divine, when 'a secretary | at your factory in the forest took | lunch in the sun and sent a telex | to God when she got back' (*SK*, 37). Further poems featuring communicative technologies and angelic signals include the entire sequence 'Last Words' and its figurations of answerphone messages, and the poem 'Wireless' which is about the first radio message sent across water (*RS*, 56). Serres's and Roberts's angels even seem to come from similar geographical places. The city of Tokyo is used by both writers as a symbol of the capacity for global interconnectivity despite great distances (see *DS*, 84). Pia observes that 'the job of angels is only to bring messages' and concludes that 'all we really are is intermediaries'. As intermediaries, she says, we are 'eternally passing among others who are also intermediaries'.<sup>12</sup> Here, 'the between' is not simply a space within which the messenger operates. Rather, Serres's writing is offering a way of understanding the messenger — and by extension messengers in Roberts's poetry — as an incarnation of 'the between'.

One of the core arguments this thesis has made, is that Roberts's poetry is a metaphysical poetry of the twenty-first century. Another opportunity for future research would be to investigate the extent to which this movement of twenty-first-century metaphysical poetry is borne out beyond Roberts's corpus. Shapcott and Muldoon have for instance both been discussed as examples of a kind of new

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

school of Donne in Chapter 2, for the way they engage with Donne's poetry and for their use of other Metaphysical features. However, the conclusion that 'the between' is a central part of Roberts's rehabilitation of metaphysical poetry, means that other poets discussed in relation to the language of touch and 'the between' might also be considered in terms of the twenty-first-century metaphysical qualities they exhibit. On the basis by which Roberts's has been judged to be metaphysical — principally the shared concern of how to touch the untouchable — the following poets can be thought to demonstrate metaphysical qualities too. Burnside can be considered for the way the skin in his poetry can be seen to 'open a path to a higher reality'.<sup>13</sup> Jamie and Farley in turn suggest themselves for the way their poetry is engaged with problematizing the limits and edges of both geographical spaces and language. Finally, Heaney's poetry suggests itself for the metaxical themes that emerge from his preoccupation with Weil. These are just a few possibilities already identified by this thesis.

The analysis of the language of touch in Roberts's poetry issues complementary challenges to contemporary scholarship. It redresses the neglect of this significant poet in the critical field of contemporary British poetry, and recommends his work as a site for additional research. Roberts's poetry continues to demand a reappraisal of the Metaphysical tradition and its persistence from the seventeenth century through the modernist period to the present; and it calls for further inquiry

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<sup>13</sup> John Redmond, 'John Burnside: The Corpse as Threshold', in *Poetry and Privacy: Questioning Public Interpretations of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (Bridgend: Seren, 2013), pp. 130-155 (p. 134).

into the poetics of 'the between' as a strategy that negotiates contemporary literary concerns at the turn of the twenty-first century.

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